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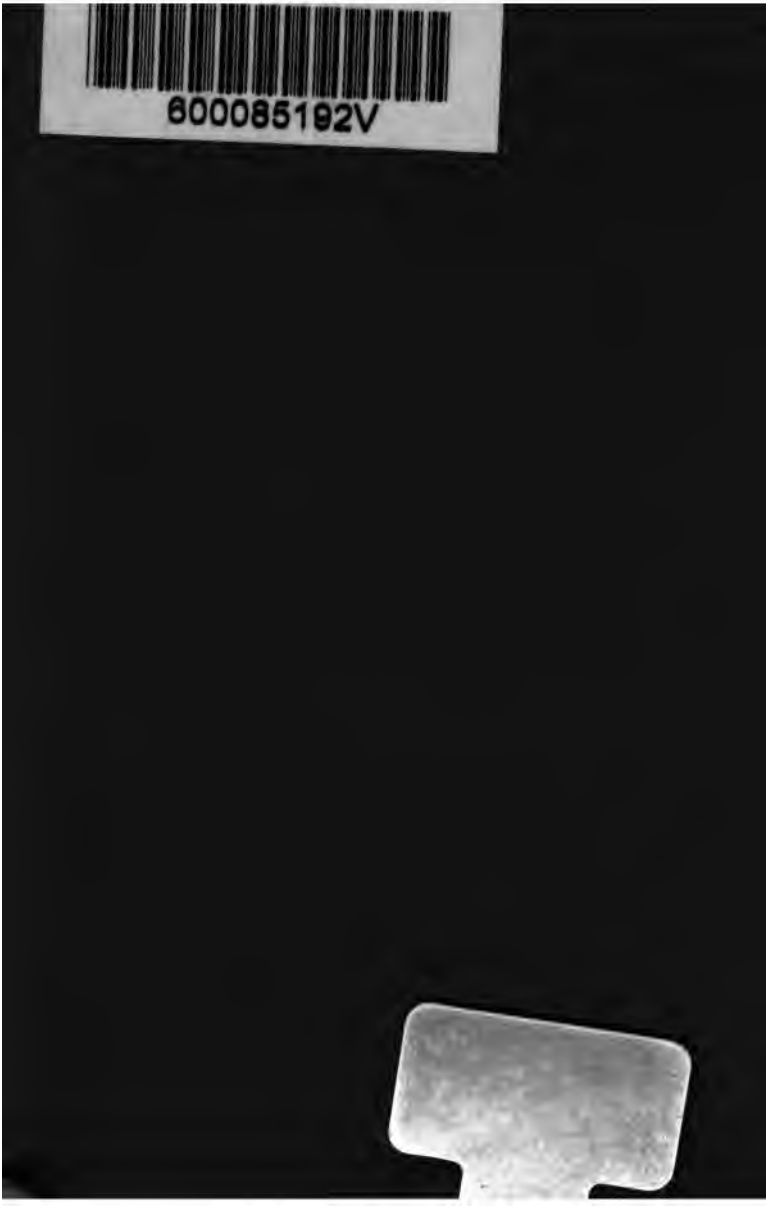
BJORN AND BERA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BJORN and BERA:

A Norse Legend.

BY

B. MONTGOMERIE RANKING,

Author of "Fair Rosamond," etc.

London:
REMINGTON & Co., 5, ARUNDEL STREET, STRAND, W.C.

1878.

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280. o. 313

TO

THE REVEREND

ROBERT NICHOLAS SANDERSON.

CONTENTS.

Book I.—Hring's Wedding.

„ II.—Snow-white's Treachery.

„ III.—Bjorn and Bera.

„ IV.—The Breaking of the Spell.

Epilogue.

BJORN AND BERA.

BOOK I.

HRING'S WEDDING.

In Scamness by the Northern Sea,
  In Scamness of the swords,
Where streams in summer joyously
  Leap to the summer fjords;
Where winter is both chill and long,
And binds the streams in fetters strong;
Where wolf and glutton, elk and bear
Tempt the hunters forth to fare,
Whether the summer sun be dancing
On rippling wave, or sickly glancing
Of winter rays strike on blue ice;
Where firs with sweeter smell than spice
Of Araby lade summer winds;
  Where maids in uplands tend the kine,
And little grows for him that grinds,
  And trolls in cave guard metal's shine;

Beloved of Gods, and god-like youth
Who dread no wind but the soft hot south;
In Scamness wide in olden days
There ruled a worthy king,
Was none more meet for minstrel's praise
Than Scamness' ruler, Hring.

He was right cunning, therewith bold;
White was the head that bore the gold,
But lusty-strong his stalwart age,
And years had made him still and sage;
First both in peaceful gathering
And war; with words he swayed the Thing,
And foes with might of axe's swing;
With clear blue eyes and mild;
That yet a coward might not meet,
Nor liar; but on whom might greet
With honest voice, or who was fleet
To seek through bitter Honour's sweet,
King Hring full grandly smiled.

This goodly lord, this worthy knight,
A queen he had that Drifa hight,
Her hair like autumn sheaves was bright,
And like the northern snows

Her bosom and her arms were fair;
Their whiteness too her face might share,
Save where on cheek and lips so rare
A blush, like that which glows
On snow-clad peaks at morning tide,
Spoke health's domain and woman's pride;
Alack the day! she drooped and died,
Whereof this sorrow flows.

For scarcely might her dim eye see
Her son new-cradled on her knee,
Before the gates of Paradise
Rolled back, and angels, loving-wise,
Came forth to lead her therewithin
To rest amid the flowers,
Until her much-expected kin
To that sweet resting-place might win,
Where enters care, nor pain, nor sin,
Nor frost may nip the bowers.

Thus when the Lady Drifa sweet
Was lapped in silken winding sheet,
When mass was sung, and prayers were said,
And God had keeping of the dead,
The heart of Hring with double love

Was laid upon his son, who throve
And waxed, he trusted this should prove
  Friends' stay and foemen's thorn ;
And as he stroked his locks so bright
Full dim at times would grow his sight,
He prayed " God make thee a good knight ! "
  They blessed the boy as Bjorn.

Now as he grew, the boy waxed bold,
And grew in graces manifold
  That comely are to see ;
To dame he still was gentle page,
And when with comrades of his age
He set him mimic war to wage
  He had the mastery ;
Thus went the years, till spark grew fire,
And gentle page grew gentle squire,
Most innocent, most masterful ;
'Twas he could head the madding bull
In forest, or could track the bear
And take her cubs from secret lair,
And dare the utmost ; his swift feet
Were still on mountain side most fleet,
Or on blue ice ; and through blue waves,
Where cowards meet with self-made graves,

Went his white shoulders joyously
  Whether the sea in sunlight laughed,
Or better, when the wind was high
And surf was beating stormily,
Full well upon the crests to lie
  He loved; the draughts he quaffed
Of brine that washed athwart his face
Seemed but to lend him greater grace
  So waxed he manfully.

Then when the time of manhood came,
  Upon a certain day
When round about the Easter board
The earls were met, upon his sword
Half-leaning, uprose Scamness' lord
With eyes half-flicker, and half-flame.
  And thus to all 'gan say:
" Hear, earls and people, all my sons!
Full swiftly yet the life-blood runs
Within my veins; but who may tell
How soon for me the passing bell
Shall pray your prayers? Then 'twere good
Your new lord in all manlihood
And knight's observance should be skilled;
For, say that Heaven high hath willed

That I go hence all suddenly—
How if, before the mourners' cry
Have died within my people's ears,
Another cry, and sound of tears
Should fill them, for a kingdom lost,
Hopes unfulfilled, and purpose crossed?
How if the women wring their hands,
  Not for the worn old man that sleeps,
But for that one who crownèd stands
  And by no might his crowning keeps?
And all this ill may come to pass,
  If to untutored child
My throne should come; for purest glass,
  Safe-shut and undefiled
By outer wind, shows bright and clear,
And so now shows my son most dear—
But let the storm-winds sweep the glass
That it be misted, let them pass,
And see if still it shine as fair;
Try steel with fire; let piercing air
And hot sun try the mortal frame,
Before ye judge if laud or shame
Be hers who bore the man; my son
Must not for deeds his sire hath done
Take honour, but for his own deeds;—
And, sooth, I think there be some seeds

Of honour in my son!"—and here
There rose a mighty, rending cheer
From all and some, that brought the tear
  Unused to Hring's blue eyes,
As, rising swiftly from his seat
Bjorn kneeling fell before his feet,
  Who would not bid him rise.

But on his locks full tenderly,
And therewithal most masterly,
  The royal hand was laid;
And thus, while silence reigned around,
And each man in that solemn stound
Held breath to listen, with a sound
  Of tears, as one who weighed
The following of some bitter quest,
And dared the worst to win the best,
  The old man slowly said:
"Behold, fair sirs, a gentle squire
Bent to his father-lord's desire;
This my sweet son must hither wend
Where trees to southern breezes bend;
His joints must slacken with the heat,
And fierce suns on his brow must beat,
High walls shall bound his willing feet,
And for our sea, so fresh and fleet,

He shall but look on sluggish sea
That never ebbs, but ceaselessly
Holds one still, weary, peaceless rest;
All this great penance for the best
That Hring hath saved from out the past!
Because, as by the body's fast
There comes a purity of soul
And lust of reaching to the goal,
So by the fast of spirit's joy,
Our mortal frame, that pleasures cloy,
Shall grow to strength, by care inured
To griefs that haste to be endured.
Therefore my son shall wend his way
From out this wholesome land of ours,
Where Micklegard beside the bay
To brazen sky lifts gilded towers;
And there, in southern lands, a knight
Shall come to be, with stronger limb,
And with a stronger purpose dight
To battle evil, brown, and grim,
And bright, he shall return to me,—
God send I live that day to see!"

Then up they started, all and some,
And the rafters rang to their shout,

As harpers sang of the days to come,
The growing of Knighthood and Christendom,
And the end of night and doubt;
And the squire that had knelt, with a sudden spring
Lay in the arms of the ancient king,
With eyes close hidden on his breast,

And the grizzled locks swept down to rest
Upon the golden; and every earl
Made seeming his bicker of mead to birl
Against his fellow, and revel it high,
For that no watching or curious eye
Or son or father might espy.

The dragons were manned, and with golden sheen,
In richest manner that might be seen,
The decks they glittered, and purple and pall
Lay for a covering over all;
And the stout pine oars with their dropping chimes
Kept up the beat of the rower's rhymes;
The red sails gleamed in the setting sun,
Grew brown, and faded to dusk and dun;
The Quest was begun, and the fledgling flown,
And the eagle sought his nest alone.

Now winter came, and the skates were shrill
On tarn and mountain, river and rill;
Up rose the spring, and the snow grew thin
As the sun each day new strength did win;
The summer waxed, and to mountain croft
Maiden and heifer they wended aloft;
And autumn, and the ancient sires
Gazed wistfully now at unlighted fires.
The ice, and the buds, and the fruit, and the fall
Passed over the earth at the seasons' call;
And still in his hall, erect and strong,
Sate Hring with his smile to right the wrong.

And there was peace throughout the land,
  As though the waves that leapt
Against the rugged Scamness' strand
  Through southern climes had crept;
As though the halcyon of the south
Had fled the burning southern drouth
To pillow her young upon northern waves,
And harbour with mews in the northern caves;
As though God's peace on the weary earth
Had settled at last:—but they missed the mirth
Is found in battle, did those stout earls:
As a charger old, when the flag unfurls,

And trumpets of battle are shrilling their fullest,
Paws in his full-fed mead of the dullest,
They chafed in their ease, and they longed to feel
The waft of the sea-ward wind,
To hear the music of clashing steel,
And the sound of the dragon's rounded keel
On foemen's beaches grind.

Till on a night at a festive board
Outspoke an ancient hoary lord;
"What needs such muttering in each beard?
All must die, and must dree their weird,
But none need rot!—so I hold it good
We strike one stroke for our manlihood.
There never yet was merry day
Since good Queen Drifa at rest did lay;
The king grows weary with waiting here
For the son who comes not, year by year;
And worn with waiting, his ageing hand
Hath nigh forgotten the feel of the brand;
But let his old heart warm to the press
Of a fresh young bride, let her sweet caress
Woo him to winning of honour and fame
For the sake of her beauty, and his great name—
For still 'tis woman that sharpens the swords—
How like ye my rede now, good my lords?

How if we won a queenly mate
For the bed of Scamness' king ?
Would not the keels of the dragons grate
On shores to be conquered to swell our state,
And brown blades quicken and swing ? "

So was his counsel approved of all,
They gat them up, so strong and tall,
To where in his lonely state
The king in his palace went up and down,
With heavy eyes and a weary frown,
And they bade him choose a mate;
For that they deemed that Scamness' throne
No longer might tarry with one alone
To press the skins ; and he gazed, and sighed,
Until at the last he said " Denied
Shall ye never be, fair fellows of Hring ;
Then if it be good I do this thing,
And take to mine arms another wife,—
Though, God be witness, mine only joy
Lies in the life of my goodly boy,
And that, her fuller, brighter life,
That gladdens the soul of my manhood's wife—
My Drifa—whom high God assoil !—
If it be well that my years of toil

Be shared by a mate—seek ye that mate,
And she shall share in my royal state.
Then go ye forth in fitting wise
To seek in the islands a fitting prize,
Who shall be seated in Scamness' chair;
The child of a mighty king,
Gentle of mood, and of body fair,
For none but the chiefest of women may share
The couch of Scamness' Hring!"

The dragons were manned, and with golden sheen,
In richest manner that might be seen,
The decks they glittered, and purple and pall
Lay for a covering over all;
The red sails lazily over head
Flapped in the breeze as they sea-ward sped,
And the drops that dripped from each stout oar
Showed in the sunset like streaming gore;
The sea-fowl screamed, and an angry sun
Went down in the west in a cloud-bank dun,
As the fleet of the searchers took its way
Westward and northward from Scamness' bay,
With a triumphing song on their new-made quest,
To seek a mate for the eagle's nest.

On the poop of the foremost bark there stood,
  As her brown sail strained to the wind,
Three strong knights who were famed as good
For courtesy, truth, and manlihood,
  Chosen from out their kind
As fittest to choose for the king a bride
Whose graces should sort with a monarch's pride
Whose soul should be white as her bridal cloak,
Whose neck should be meet for the sea-king's
    yoke.
There was Floris Whitesark, fair of mien,
In hall and bower well-beseen,
And no whit less in battle keen
  When his laugh rang over the steel;
And Hrolf the Silent, whose grey eyes
Could read the soul; and, huge of size,
Sigurd the son of Sigurd wise,
Known on each field where the arrow flies,
  Each sea that parts to the keel.
With morn and eve the days go by
And still the wanderers northward fly;
And days grow less, and nights grow long,
Yet still the rowers bend to the song
That startles the mews from cliff and scaur
To scream a burden; and still the oar
Falls in a sea where never before

The waves by prow were cleft;
And still on the poop the seekers three
Watch for a land where their Quest may be,
Dream of a coming again with glee
And song to the land they left.

The days went on, and each bright day
Grew shorter than the last,
Until one morn a shadow lay
On sea and shore, on cliff and bay,
As the sun were overcast;
The light grew dimmer and yet more dim,
The seamews ceased the waves to skim,
The waves that, with solemn and plaintive roll
Like the plaint of a bell for a passing soul,
Seemed to be telling the dead sun's dole,
Chanting his burial hymn.

For he rose no more; his glorious head
Lay pillowed at rest in the ocean's bed,
And in all the pride of might,
Over the corse of the dead sun slain,
To clutch at his robbery-won domain,
Forth strode the victor Night;
With all that land for his banqueting hall,
Roofed with a sky like a funeral pall;

While the cold star-cressets shone bright and
blue,
To show where hither and thither there flew
Some fowls of dark and of noisome wing,
That had skill to wail, but had none to sing.
And now and again a lurid light
Flared up—the Northern fire—
As the ghost of the dead sun haunting the night,
Or the glow of his funeral pyre.

But further and further their barks must go,
For they follow their quest through weal and woe;
By barren cliff, by blue ice-floe,
Through crashing seas they bear,
Northward ever, and never afraid;
For Scamness' sons were fearless made,
And all their trouble were well apaid,
If craft or force, if tongue or blade,
Might win the maiden who should be laid
By Hring, his couch to share.

The waves they mourned, and the icebergs
crashed,
The ships went warily through;
The cold stars flickered, the streamers flashed,
Yet still that stalwart crew

They bent to the oars, with a rowing song
That wakened the wolves that sneaking throng
In furtive bands on the ice-bound shore;
Now and again, with a hungry roar,
A grim white bear would rear his head
And plunge at the rowers, to fall back dead
And make for the crew good store of meat,
For even his carcase was good and sweet
To the men, whose store of food was done.
And yet for Hring no bride was won.

There came a pause in the weary night,
As if in the South were day,
The lights grew rosy, the stars grew white,
It seemed as a hint of the far-off light
Had come to that land, as they rounded a bight,
And swang in a silent bay.
Where there was ice or fear no more,
But a water that lapped a pebbled shore,
And the dragons rested after their flight,
Sleeping at anchor in Northern night.

Ever the streamers, that fitfully
Had flashed in the sky of yore,
Gathered together in Northern sky,
And streamed to the Northern shore.

The knights stood watching beside the mast,
As the wild lights flickered, and came, and passed;
Quoth Sigurd Sigurdson,
"I rede, fair fellows, we seek to shore,
For an there be truth in olden lore
Our quest is found, and our labour o'er,
And Scamness' queen is won."

Then Hrolf he girded tight his sword,
And Floris Whitesark, never a word
He said, but his yellow hair
He flung from his face, and the ship was beached
And each to his fellow a right hand reached,
And darkling forth they fare,
Whither the beckoning lights have led;
The stars danced merrily over head,
With a wild blue light like witches' lamps,
Till the fires grew dim of the sea-ward camps,
Where the shipmen laid them down to snore,
Weary with tugging the weary oar,
Or rested their bodies, long used to swink,
And their sorrowful hearts, with food and drink,
And clamour of choruses such as ring
In the sea-ward huts of Scamness' king.

Beneath their tread the crisp snow crushed,
  Behind them lay the night,
On either hand the chill winds rushed,
  The grey wolf's footing light,
From out the darkness faintly heard,
As stealthy crawl the snow-wreaths stirred,
And flap and cry of noisome bird,
  Upon each ear must smite.
Such sounds through many a weary day,
And such-like sights, each heart must fray:
But now, behold, of light a ray,
  And sounds as of the blest—
Before their eyes, that in amaze
They shrouded from the sudden blaze,
Lay lawns, and meads, and woodland ways,
  Swift streams, and pools of rest.

A garden pleasaunce, where the turf
To myriad buds of spring gave birth.
Here, where its smooth and level space
Seemed newly shorn, a starry race
Of daisies smiled upon the sky;
And, where like meadow it waved high,
Beneath the boughs an azure sheet
Of blue bells made the light air sweet

That hardly stirred the whispering trees,
But went and came ; and mixed with these,
Half-floating in the tinkling stream,
Forget-me-nots, that seemed to dream,
Smiled upwards to the lady-smocks,
And in the boughs the throstle-cocks
Were singing as 'twere morn of May ;
And ever and anon the lay
Of the night-singing bird would rise,
And higher, near the magic skies,
The noise of some new-risen lark ;
And from a grove where firs were dark
Came sounds of pigeons, such as mark
The dreamy noontide of a day
In middle June; and rabbit grey,
And timid hare played in and out
Among the stems, and dappled side
Of fawn was seen, and antler stout
Of guardian stag, who watched his rout
That in the bracken hide.

All manner of delight was there
Whereon the weary eye,
That tires of branches black and bare,
And sullen snow-fraught sky,

May rest with gazing, and grow fain
To know that on the earth again
The summer hath set noiseless foot.
There bent the boughs with golden fruit,
Half hidden by thick creamy buds
That promised more; the bloom that ruds
The apple boughs at Eastertide
Vied with the apples at its side,
Which could show redder; nothing lacked
Of spring or summer—squirrels cracked
And chattered in the hazel trees
That bent with autumn store, the breeze
  Shed rose leaves all about the sward,
    And stirred the primrose 'neath its leaves,
  All seasons joined in quaint accord,
    The hours of bud, and bloom, and sheaves.

Right in the middle garden place
There lay a green, smooth-shaven space,
  No Lammas moon more round,
Wherein, for centre of the ring,
There stood a quaintly-fashioned thing
  The searchers to astound;
It seemed in shape a royal throne,
All carven of some changeful stone,

As changeful as a cunning lie;
Its hues to view, incessantly,
  Now white, now red as flame,
Innocent blue, or jealous green,
Came, went, and flashed in fiery sheen,
  And changed, and went, and came.

But all astonied Floris stood,
  And clutched his silent peers,
Who gazed with him in doubtful mood,
Divided, at the sight they viewed,
  'Twixt new delight and fears;
For the mead was not untenanted,
And low bent every knightly head,
And veiled was every knightly brow
At the sight that greeted their seeing now.

Upon that seat there sate a dame,
  And its colours changed and flashed,
That struck them all with a sudden shame
  As she gazed, all unabashed,
At the three good knights whom now she spied
As they viewed her charms in her naked pride;
For saving her hair, that was long and red,
Was never a mantle about her spread.

It waved, and rippled, and curled, and clung
About her limbs, and its folds she flung
With two white hands from her snowy breast,
As if that her beauty might stand confessed,
With a weary longing, and passionate zest;
  As if in that goodly place
Her matron heart desired a tongue
To speak her winsome and ever young;
As if in her ear some song were rung,
Such as by lovers are softly sung
  Lapped in their love's embrace.

Oh, she was goodly, and she was strong!
Her shapely limbs were white and long,
Her hair was amber, her eyes were blue,
Her bold, clear eyes that looked men through;
Although the summer had ripened her,
Her beauty would make the hot blood stir
In the heart of a man; for such a dame
Was fit for a warrior known to fame;
A mate for a man, for the wild wolf's den,
A fitting ruler, a mother of men!

But there were softer, gentler graces
  Within the garden, and there glowed
A new light in the warrior faces,
  A ruddier blush, and quicker flowed

The blood that hurried from their hearts,
And sharper were their pulses' smarts,
And deeper veiled was each pure eye
For that which on the turf did lie;
A maiden, gentle-seeming, white,
Unconscious in her soul's delight,
Singing a little song of bliss,
  And tossing here and there the flowers
That on her snow-white nakedness
Fell down, as they her limbs would dress
  With clothing of the bowers.
You could not doubt but she her mother
Lay close beside, for sure none other
  Than that proud dame, so cold and fair,
Could bear such gentle child and tender,
With younger limbs so soft and slender,
  And such like-falling auburn hair;
She lay and sang at her mother's feet,
With a dreamy look in her face so sweet,
As if she were watching for him who should greet
  Her listening ear with a lover's prayer,
  And now and again with a fretful air
  She raised her arm from her bosom fair,
  The buds from her falling-locks to tear,
To lie with the bloom at her feet.

For all around the throne was spread
A carpet of those buds of dread
That clothe the Hill of Blue,
Where witches dance in a grisly ring
When summer hath fully fledged its wing,
And chaunt in the night of mad Beltane
Their triumph o'er bodies and souls new slain,
That wither to freshen their crew.
Beneath her feet, for a carpet sweet,
The dark blue buds were thickly spreading,
And a dark blue wreath from her couch beneath
With the pride of her hair was wedding.

The three stood mute, in hapless case,
How might they win to the garden place ?
For all before them, and around
The mystical green garden's bound
There rose a barrier, that might tame
The stoutest heart, a wall of flame,
That flickered, and flashed, and went, and came,
Like the hue of the throne within ;
Thin and clear, full seven feet high
That flame shot up from earth to sky
And barred all wooers utterly
That to the dames would win.

Thus as they stood irresolute,
There rose such sound as double flute
Might breathe, to quell the people's dread
Who bow with trembling, covered head
Before some incense-wreathèd shrine:
"Draw near, draw near, ye knights of mine!"
So went her words, "nor scathe nor teen
True hearts shall find in this my screen
That wards the cold world from our nest.
Oh, happy day, and ye the best
That for long waiting years have blessed
Mine eyes, for now my weary story
Draws to fulfilling—praise and glory,
Shall once again become my meed!"
Then Floris of the snowy weed
Stepped forward, and his comrades twain;
Whilst the flame parted, and like rain
Of summer shower on each brow
The fire-flakes fell, as cool and sweet,
And they went on full low to bow
Before that lovely lady's feet,
While she spoke on "A wonder thing
Ye deem this fire-encircled ring,
Hear all, short rede is meet!

There ruled a king in Finmark land,
In Finmark by the sea,
Where winds wail loud on every hand,
And ever on the crumbling strand
The waves beat spitefully;
Where stones are many, and trees are few,
And thralls, a sullen stunted crew,
Serve well the men of the strong right hand;
Where reindeer crop the frozen land,
And days are chill, and nights are long,
And only the king and the earls are strong—
By reason of their god-born might
They need no aid of fostering light—
In Finmark—ah, there were merry days,
Despite the cold, and it fits me well
My fatherland even here to praise,
Though this fair garden doth excel
Those barren shores—for I did dwell
On that bleak shore in the sinless days.

I was the daughter of the king,
His darling daughter, he had but one;
The gods had given him no strong son;
But me he wedded with chrism and ring,

With harping and feast, to a noble knight,
Who should get sons to uphold his right
When arm should grow too weak to smite
  The foes that his axe held slaves;
We lived in quiet, and sweet accord,
And one fair daughter I bore my lord,
  In Finmark by the waves.

There came a night, when the feast was high,
And king and earl drank royally;
My father sat in his kingly state
Above the board, and my knightly mate
Beside him—I too, seated there,
Smiled on the feast through my yellow hair.
The cups went round, and the rafters rang
With noble deeds that minstrels sang;
The sound of the harps in my father's hall
Was as when to the waters the waters call
In the thundering chime of a waterfall,
  Or when on the hills at morn
The northern wind through the pine-trees sweeps
To waken the day, in the east that sleeps,
With a hymn, and the faint sun wearily creeps
  To his earth like a child new-born.

Then in a pause, as the king uprose
With the horn in his mighty hand,
And the music sank to a wailing close,
And earls in a stalwart band
Sprang up to drink to me, and to swear
That I was of women the fairest fair,
In the moment's silence we heard a sound,
And the king he started, the earls turned round,
And the thralls forgot to pour the ale
As they crouched by their masters, wan and pale;
For we heard a crashing of pine and oak,
And a cry of "Kill!" and the feast upbroke,
As each good warrior clutched his brand
And stood for the king to fight,
And the king leapt down from his throne to stand
By the side of his youngest knight.

Oh, then there was swinging of axes keen,
And sweep of berry-brown blades, I ween!
For the Danish foe, while the feast was high,
And the porter filled with mead did lie,
Had passed the postern treacherously,

And the keep was lost and won;
For huddled like sheep the earls fell slain,
Shot dead in their place with the arrows' rain,
The fight was over and done.
Beside the throne was the king shot dead
As his axe crashed down through the leader's head,
And clutching my robe, with a sob and a sigh
My knight fell over my feet to die;
Then I stole from the hall right carefully,
Unseen, by a secret spell
That I muttered in haste—a spell of might
I had of my nurse—and I took my flight
As clang of axe and halloa of fight
Rang Finmark's funeral knell.

In Finmark, home of gramarye,
Full many warlocks are to see,
But I had greater craft;
For she who nursed me came from far,
Beneath some cunning Eastern star
Her young eyes first had laughed;
And she, an ancient withered crone,
That had no daughter of her own,

Loved me, her nurse child, and full well
She taught me rhyme and mystic spell,
So that there was no wiser maid
Than I in Finmark—thus the blade
That slew my lord, of me his wife
Was cheated, and I fled the strife,
And with my child I wandered forth
To the place where I harbour the night-held north.

Whereto, by the cunning my nurse had taught,
A space of her eastern land I brought,
The garden ground whereon ye stand;
I summoned it round me with high command,
I girt it in with a flaming wall
That never a foeman's foot might fall
Within the bounds of my paradise,
But I wrought it so with a quaint device
That the fire should never harm true knight;
And here have we dwelt, my daughter bright
And I, in peace, in our foes despite."

She ceased, but in her hearers' ears
The music still seemed singing
Of that sweet voice, now thick with tears,
Now clear as trumpet ringing.

As when the winds have waked by night,
And sunk to rest with morning light,
Whoso at early dawn will rove
By water-meadow, or by grove,
Shall see in mead the aspens quiver,
And willows by the running river,
As if they murmured of the tale
That turned their green leaves faint and pale;
Some unknown tale of fear and dread
Of which the breeze unburdenèd
Its bosom in the quiet night
With many sighings, till affright
Took all the trees at that wild shrift;
But the breeze, lightened, found a rift
Among the clouds, where heaven's blue
Was coming out of night anew,
Whereby to heaven fled the breeze,
Leaving its burden to the trees;
And still they whisper, and still they quake,
  Though sun shines sweetly, and skylark sings,
For the live-long night they must listen and wake,
  And the wild wind whispereth gruesome things.

At length Sir Hrolf his palms he smote,
With sudden clearing of his throat,

And thus he cried on high:
"Methinks our quest is here fulfilled!
How say ye, sirs? I grant you skilled
In lore of love, but I
Know more of my good blade and keen
Than shining eyes and tresses sheen.
Say then your rede; I hold that won
Is Scamness' queen, and seeking done."

But Sigurd, low and cautiously,
As half in awe, made quick reply:
"I like not witches, nor who works
With eastern spells—some craft there lurks
Most times behind the subtle wiles
Of such a wife, and she beguiles
The man who cometh in her snare.
For, say she be both blithe and fair
To outward seeming, who can tell
But this fair-seeming bonnibel
At change of moon may change her form
And howling prowl through night and storm,
A grey wolf! Think ye it were meet
We to our lord should bring
His bane, in guise of maiden sweet,
For knightly offering?"

...dainty head,
...be wed,
...ere we stand,
...ness-land!"
...e dame also,
...ights to go.

...sward,
...w,
...ward,
...
the north
...went forth
...e behind,
...ing wind,
...
...ise
...a trice
...ow wan,
...was gone,
...ay light
through Northern

...d many a bed
...w was spread,

Then Floris, stepping out before
His muttering comrades twain,
Knelt down upon the sward, and swore
Aloft, in knightly vein,
Great shame it were that such a May
Should waste her wholesome life away
Within that magic circle's round,
Quoth he, "The long-sought bride is found!
My queen, I kneel before thy feet,
As should true knight, and hold it meet
That thou shouldst sit on Scamness' throne!
Long have we roamed the Northland lone
To seek for our king a fitting bride,
And surely thou in thy youthful pride
Mightest be queen of Micklegard!
Wherefore arise, and in safest ward
Go forth with us where the dragons wait
To bear thee throneward in fitting state.
Come, and the right of thy beauty claim!
And go thou with us, too, good dame,
Nor of your state be dream of shame,
There be garments, and to spare,
Silk and sendal, samite and pall,
Shall deck your limbs, till in Hring's great hall
Ye stand—oh, fairest fair!

No scathe shall come to thy dainty head,
To a mighty king thou shalt be wed,
And true knights three, lo, here we stand,
To bring thee safely to Scamness-land!"
And the maid arose, and the dame also,
Withouten word with the knights to go.

And as the last foot left the sward,
And crackled on the snow,
The belt of light shot heavenward,
And wavered to and fro;
A sudden blast came from the north
As knight and dame in fere went forth
With never a wistful glance behind,
A shrill cold gust of moaning wind,
As if the spirits of the ice
At wrecking of that paradise
Exulting shrieked; for in a trice
The belt of rosy flame grew wan,
One flicker, sank, and all was gone,
And vanished now was any light
Save such as shines through Northern night.
Where erst had blossomed many a bed
Full fathom deep the snow was spread,

Where doves had cooed, was but the shriek
  Of some night-faring fowl,
Where groves had waved, the moorland bleak
  Rang to the grey wolf's howl;
And all that land of gramarye
Had passed like Easter pageantry.

Yet still it seemed as if the might
  Of some compelling hand
Maintained unequal, failing fight
With powers of darkness, for though light
  Had passed from off the land,
All in the starlit winter sky
The Northern streamers rose on high,
As if the flame that here must die,
  Like some fair nymph of old
Was rapt away, aloft to shine,
By pitying lover's might divine,
To earth for evermore a sign,
  Bright, passionless, and cold.

Thus came the knights, and thus they went
  Full blithe of heart and free,
And soon the rowers' might was lent
  To send their ships asea.
Merrily back to Scamness now,
The darksome sea they swiftly plough,

Till dawn grows red, and the southern sky
Is a blaze of gold, and the sun rides high,
And once again with a welcoming roar
The dragons are beached on Scamness' shore.

So these three knights, and that brave dame,
And that pale, shrinking maid,
They took their way where the old king came,
For never a whit he stayed,
But soon as they said, "There hath come thy mate!"
He clad him in silk, and in royal state
Silent he went to his castle gate,
And silent down the stair
That led from the bridge to the stone-built road,
And his hoary locks from the ring down-flowed,
As he stood to lead to her own abode
The bride who his couch must share.

And when she came, with wistful eyes
He gazed upon her, and the sighs
Were thick within his voice,
As he stooped down his manly head
To kiss her brow, and thus he said:
"Thrice welcome be thou to my bed
And board, my people's choice!"

Then as together they passed along,
Outrang the minstrel's bridal song;
The revel was high, and the feast was long—
  And one dreamed of the dead:—
The morrow's morn in minster high
Saw bishop bless the nuptial tie;
There was sound of wassail and revelry,
  And thus King Hring was wed.

BOOK II.

SNOW-WHITE'S TREACHERY.

When the sun had come to the Northern shore
  To set the waters free,
And the thatch eaves wept for his warmth no
    more,
And harvesters gathered their scanty store,
  And blue was the Northern sea ;
There was fluting and harping, and many a cask
Set all abroach for whoever might ask
In the halls of Hring ; each night that went
Seemed all too short as its hours were spent ;
As torches, with their smoke-crowned shine,
Made water-jars gleam as brimmed with wine.
And every day was all too short
For the love and laughter and warlike sport
That told the revels of Scamness' court.
  And every rising morn
Saw one gold head, that topped a frame
The might of the olden gods might shame,
The first to hail the sun's red flame;

And every night the horn
That high at the royal board was filled
Was emptied first, for the king so willed,
To his new-found, long-lost Bjorn.

Many a week was the Snow-white maid
By her hoary wooer throned and laid,
And ever her goodly mother stayed
At the royal pair's behest;
Revelled in purple, and stately went,
With brows set straight that late were blent,
In pride of beauty and full content,
But none who saw her blessed.
For in those blue eyes was a fateful gleam,
An icy look like a frozen stream;
"A witch-wife," whispered men apart,
They signed both brow and fluttering heart
Who never had quailed for earthly might,
As they marked in her eyes the evil light
That still her soul would dart.

But it seemed as though the ancient king
Had gotten his youth again,
With the magic touch of the dainty thing
Whose smile had witched both heart and brain;
Once more his dragons ploughed the main,

And ancient lords would say
'Twas merry to see the heroes come
With store of plunder hastening home,
It was good to hear of towns new burned,
And a new stern lore to the outlands learned,
And all by a tender May!
And youths who had chafed in their dull repose
Vowed that sweeter than Southern rose
Was the snow-white flower, whose magic skill
Had banished the cares stout hearts that kill,
Whose tongue had sharpened axe and bill,
And quickened the heart that froze.

They never saw her pace her room
Alone in wrath, with the frown of gloom
Upon her face; they never heard
The fretful cry, and the weary word,
"Must I then wither in all my pride,
The toy of a dotard, a waning bride!
Will there no lover come forth to save
My maiden face from this living grave?
What though the fighters call him king
And me his queen, though the golden ring
Have circled around my yellow hair—
The buds of my garden were thrice as fair,
And I knew naught beside them there!

But now ere long must the lover's song
Lighten my lot, and a light young kiss
Must close my eyes, or the love-light dies
Out of my life, that is made a prize
To woo a corpse to bliss! "

Thus she moaned, and still she wandered
Through the gazing throng,
But some old greybeards mused and pondered
What could be the wrong
That knit that smooth white brow, and caused
The little foot to stamp, they paused
Confused at its impatient pat
As courtiers talked of this and that
With clumsy, honest courtesy,
Thinking to please her: none might see
Her wild witch-mother softly creeping
By night beside her couch to kneel,
When Hring in glamoured trance lay sleeping,
Nor hear her words, " For woe or weal
Thou art the queen of the Scamness' land;
Wait thou awhile, and the Scamness strand
Shall send thee a lover—I see him come;
Thine eyes shall be blind and thy lips be dumb
With liking and longing—and all thy pain
Shall seem to thy heart as a long-lost strain

Of sweet and pitiful melody
That makes the music of revelry
Fuller, and bolder, and richer to be,
When bliss is thine again!"

The winter waned, the fir-trees budded,
And blood-red blushed the larch,
With swirl of spate the streams were flooded
As through the rainbow arch
The spring came forth to greet the sun,
Her hero whose might had her freedom won.

It was the custom of the king
That when the snow was done,
And all things felt the kiss of spring
Because the kindly sun
Had loosed the fetters of the sea,
And long blue waves danced merrily
For simple joy that they were free,
And the surf rolled in with a chant of praise
To the might that had ended the prison days—
'Twas then the fashion of Scamness' lord
That, rising like his castle's ward
From skin-spread couch at hint of day
He scaled a turret, and till gay
The sky red up itself to greet
The morning—nay, until the heat

Smote on his aged face—he stood
A-gazing seaward, hand for hood
Above his eyes, that earnestly
Looked outward to the outer sea.
But never heard he chime of oars
  Through weary years, and never glint
Of red sail came to Scamness shores
  At morning tide, but black as flint,
All flecked with white, beneath his hall
  The sullen waves would beat the rocks,
And breaking, seemed to cry and call
  " No more ! "—and still his yearning wox,
And day by day with weary head
He sought his hall with heavy tread,
And thus within his heart he said:
" Alas, but were thy trial done !
  Alas, the longing for thine eyes
To smile in mine—my son, my son !
  And she who in my bosom lies
  Nor knows nor recks this sacrifice,
Though two be named as one ! "

He knew not how she lay and flung
  Her arms to sideward of the couch,
And said, " My beauty fresh and young
  At this old dotard's feet must crouch,

And that brave lover comes not yet!
Am I so loathly in my youth
That me each morning he can forget
To seek for—something! Though in sooth
I know not what—some dream, I wis,
That weans his heart from present bliss.
What care I—come, thou lover, come!
Eyes shall be blind and lips be dumb,
And thou shalt toy with my golden hair,
Clip me, and kiss me, and speak me fair."

There came a morn when a sudden shout
From the height of the turret rang,
That the watching guards below ran out
To see the king who swang
His trembling arms in the morning air,
And all on his floating silver hair
There lay a glory of sun-lent gold
From the rising day, and his visage old
Was bright with the day, and brighter still
With a smile as of joy that had come to fill
His life once more with happiness.
Anon he stretched his hands to bless
The waves, it seemed; like prophet old
With hoary locks, whereon the gold

Still lingered as the crown of life
Had crowned him; so in olden strife
The prophet stood when Amalek
Grew faint at Heaven-directed beck.

And, lo, upon the far horizon
A dun-red sail, that grew ere long
A goodly ship that flags bedizen,
And hark, the rowers' homely song!
And Hring is running down the stair,
And forth to shore must all men fare;
The ship has beached, but through the foam
One man hath leapt, so fain for home;
And there is shouting, and singing, and sobbing,
For Bjorn the Fair with the golden head
Is lying at rest, his great heart throbbing
Against his father's—who deemed him dead.

With song and shouting, with clamour and state,
They brought the prince to the castle gate,
And what was she that issued forth
As white as a winter of farthest North,
Except her red half-open mouth
That seemed as warm as a summer of South,
With wild blue eyes, that hungrily gazed
On Bjorn, who stood as though amazed

A moment, then on bended knee
Sank down, in honest chivalry
To kiss the hot and trembling hand
That waved as it would have him stand,
To greet the queen of Scamness-land.

The bright blue eyes grew soft and mild,
The white cheek had a blush,
You might have thought a chidden child
Before a master harsh and wild
Stood mute, till with a rush
Of wonderful music that filled the ear
Her words leapt forth, as she bade good cheer
To Scamness prince, and the hoary king
Looked thanks and love to the dainty thing
That for his sake so loved his son—
And thus was Bjorn's mischance begun.

But vainly were her welcomes squandered
Upon the prince, whose roving eye
Behind her to her maidens wandered
As seeking if he might espy
Some well-known face, and much she pondered
Why her sweet words had curt reply,
Until with one quick sudden sigh,
Like his who comes from deepest diving,
Prince Bjorn half sprang, the fire reviving

In his tanned cheek, to where there waited
Behind the queen a band unmated
Of fairest daughters of Scamness' earls,
And stopped, and bent his head whose curls
Fell over her hand, and she marked that his neck
Was red as the rising sun
When it strikes on a frozen mountain beck,
And she knew that his heart was won.

Won, and she had no share therein,
No hope of solace or pleasant sin ;
Won, and her life would be wearier now,
Strange lines came into her smooth white brow,
A cruel light in her eyes there came,
She turned her round like a stately dame
As if she would summon her ladies all
To usher the knight to his father's hall ;
Swift she turned like a springing snake,
She saw two gentle brown eyes wake
To gladness, and one swan-white neck
Grow rosy, and one little beck
As who should say " Aye, art thou true,
I deemed not otherwise ! " then flew

The red-blood to the Snow-white's cheek,
She spake on high " Come hither, girls,
We women must bring this knight so meek
To the feast of Scamness' earls ! "
Ever she thought in her venomous heart
" Ah, Bera false ! Ah, Bera fair !
Shall thy sweet-seeming presence part
My love and me—then come Despair !
And alas, thou art bonnie, alas, thou art bright,
And I waited so long for the coming knight !
Nay, but I'll win him, and I will wear it
The flower of his young unstained love,
Nor thou, nor the world, nor heaven shall share it,
The heart that I hunger for, though I should tear it
From out his bosom, my treasure trove ! "

With horns and with harping, with shouting and song
They flocked to the hall, the festive throng ;
And the night grew old, and the day grew young,
And the bells for prime were unheeded rung,
And still the harpers swept the strings
Singing the deeds of the ancient kings,

And Snow-white still sat fain to hear
The sound of the voice to her heart so dear,
And watch the curve of his comely mouth
As he told of Micklegard down in the south;
Where all through winter the roses blow
And gold is given for ice and snow,
And never an honest northern wind
Will blow, men's sinews tight to bind.
And still she looked, and still she listened,
Her cheek grew red as the mantling wine,
Her heart cried out, as her blue eyes glistened,
"Come death, come shame, so he be mine!"

Before the northern winds had driven
The prince to front his southern doom,
A sacred troth-plight had been given
One summer evening in the gloom;
They met within the pine-tree grove
And each knew either for true love;
For when he tried his voice to steady
And tell how all things now were ready
For his departure, and how state
Should grace his going, and elate
He spoke himself at thoughts of glory,
His pale cheek told another story;

His faint voice quivered, broke, and died,
And she, close clinging to his side,
Looked up with eyes of lost despair
To meet his gaze, whereat their hair
Mingled together as each face
Sprang to the other, one embrace
Told all their love, then swiftly spoken
The troth-plight, and the silver token
Between the twain for binding broken,
There came a little time of quiet,
  Of peaceful talking, and of roaming
Beneath the pines, afar from riot,
  Of love, and trust, and gloaming.

Love is strong and trust is steady
  When true hearts are knit together;
Swiftly were the dragons ready,
  Secretly she watched the weather,
Yet when, with a muttered word
In her ear, more guessed than heard,
Bera's love leapt on his deck
Stood she with her swan-white neck
Watching mast, and sail, and oar,
Watching wind, and sky, and shore,
Till the red sail turned to dun,

Thinking " When this quest is won
Will he come as true to me
As I for his love will be ?
Courtly dames will woo his smiling,
  Will they win him from his oath ?
Nay, what thoughts are these defiling
  That pure troth that binds us both !
Go, mine own, and I will bear me
  As a hero's bride should do,
Even though the tempests scare me,
  Though I dream of bondage new
For thy neck that still is warm
With the binding of mine arm,
  Thou shalt have my trust—thy due !"

So, her quiet heart reposing
  On the faith that made her life,
Hid she in her bosom's closing
  All her hopes with blessing rife,
Crushed the often-rising fears,
Sealed within their fount the tears ;
Jocund seemed she, blithe and gay ;
Many wooed the brown-eyed May,
And with gentle thanks and tender
Would she answer, but to render

Any answer but her thanks
Still she stinted; as the banks
Of some wilful-flowing stream
Grow the fresher for its gleam
Yet seek vainly to enclose it
With their bondage, so who chose it
Might have gladdening from the smile
Of her mouth, but no soft wile
Might her from her troth beguile;
Each hot glance her calm eye froze it.

Yet at eve her fond foot lingered
By the waves where last they parted,
And the beads she musing fingered
Dropped more slowly as there started
To her eyes unbidden tears,
To her heart unbidden fears,
As the days went by,
And at morn aroused from sleeping
By the sound of her own weeping
Sadly must she cry:
"Oh my knight, and oh, my lover,
Only a word and a brief sweet kiss
And my life was stayed, and perchance 'tis over
And only Paradise brings me bliss!"

And days went by, as the days were fated,
And still she watched and still she waited ;
None might know of her heavy plight,
For the soft brown eyes had their wonted light,
And still she braided her nut-brown hair,
And her laugh rang clear as she knew no care,
And no man knew that her heart was breaking,
As hope, full loth and slow forsaking
Her weary soul, was robbing her days
Of the quickening sun — then came that blaze
Of sudden light on her fainting soul,
When the sound of the landward breakers' roll
Changed from the chime of her lover's knells
To the clash and clang of welcoming bells,
Till she sang at the Snow-white queen's adorning,
Till she met her knight in the new-born morning,
And a great content and a joy there stole,
At the glance of his eyes, to her weary soul.

Not many days had come and gone
And the torches still on the revels shone,
When after a feast, when the first full horn
Was drained to the health of goodly Bjorn,
He rose at the board from his wonted place
And hastened to kneel, as he sued for grace,

At the feet of his sire with his clasped hands
laid
On the aged knees, and on high he said
" A boon, my father! a boon, Sir King,
Grant to thy son, to thy knight, oh Hring!"
And the old man laid his trembling palms
On the strong broad shoulders, while sudden
qualms
Began to trouble his aching breast;
How if the eaglet were weary of rest,
If the knight were fain for another quest
And sought to the sea once more!
Then must his solace be stolen again,
Once more his worn eyes seek the main
At morning tide, and seek in vain
As they sought in days of yore.

But strong and clear was the voice of Hring
For all his inward dread,
As the good right hand of Scamness' king
Was laid on the golden head;
" 'Tis thine, my son, if blood must spill
To work thine end, thou shalt have thy will,
For well I wot that first in the spilling
Will be my knight, at the trumpet's shrilling;

If thou would'st work with gold,
In Scamness now is wealth good store,
Spare not for spending, a plenty more
Hath many a Southern hold!"

Amongst the earls was a waiting hush
As each bent eagerly from his seat,
For they dreamed already they heard the rush
Of the keels and the pine oars' measured beat;
And the young men whispered "Send it be steel
That now must work our fellow's weal!"
And grave were the brows of grey beards old
At thought of how youth would scatter the gold,
As again the king spoke, softlier now,
"Is quiet irksome to thee, my knight?
Seek'st thou again the sea to plough
And find in battle thy soul's delight?
Or hast thou a love on that Southern shore
And would'st thou win to her arms once more?"

"Now nay, my lord, and nay, my sire,
My quest is over and done,
I had rather bask by our good hall fire
Than sweat in the Eastern sun;
And though my arm hath its olden might
I dream not now of a new-sought fight;

Bethink thee, it is but a day or two
I have gazed on our hills and our sea so blue ;
I seek no bowers, the moorlands dun
Are fairer by far to Scamness' son,
And better I love our homely feasts
Than the cates, and flagons, and far-sought beasts
That furnish the boards of Micklegard ;
My limbs love better a pallet hard
Than the soft down-beds that murder rest ;—
But this I ask—that at thy behest
The maidens may lead in her maiden pride
The brown haired Bera to be my bride."

Uprose the king, and a sudden rain
Of tears, like an April mist,
Clouded the blue eyes, that flashed again
Like a sea that the sun hath kissed
Through a sudden shower, and loud he cried
" A blessing on thee and thy chosen bride
Oh son of my heart ! Oh, happy day,
For the curse of our house is rolled away,
The eagle's brood shall fill the nest,
And perchance thy son on my knees shall rest
Before the time of my last lone quest !
Ho, earls ! fill up, we will drink till morn
To Bera, the love of the good Knight Bjorn ! "

Tidings have come to the Snow-white queen,
As she sits in her bower lone,
That have brought to her eyes an evil sheen,
And white as the white whale's bone
Are her tight-pressed lips, and with love and hate
Her heart is torn, but in silent state
She seems to list to her maidens' words,
As they tell how the earls on their good brown swords
To the prince have fealty newly sworn,
And how the revel must last till morn
Because the shadow of Scamness' crown
Already circles the locks of brown.
And having heard them, with accents mild
She bade them forth—then arms so wild
She flung in the air, and her breast she beat,
And down the stair with hurrying feet
She gat her forth in the night alone
By the wandering waves unheard to moan :
But her eyes still shone with a wicked light,
And an evil smile on her face there played,
As she muttered " Shall he in my despite
Be wed with her—then keep thee, maid !

The time" she said "is short I ween,
They will brook no delaying,
The bride is willing, the bridegroom keen—
And how to stay their playing!
My mother swore that the coming knight
Should comfort my soul in its evil plight,
That I should lie in his goodly arms,
And sure there is might in my mother's charms!
Yet would that no glamour but that of mine eyes
Should chain me my captive, should snare my prize!
I will await him, and lie at his feet,
And win him to wooing with words full sweet;
I will clasp his knees, I will claim my right,
And sure as a courteous, gentle knight
He will not brook that tender dame
Should lie at his feet, but for very shame
Will raise me, and clip me, and laid in his arms
What need for the helping of Finmark charms!"
So she pondered and smoothed her brow,
And the days drew on and the time had come
When end of waiting was nearing now,
Nor dreamed the lovers that end was doom.

Up and down the terrace long,
As the moon was rising,
Trampled Bjorn, full lithe and strong,
Chanting now and then a song
Of the bear's surprising
In her den, and how her cubs
All were taken. and the rubs
That strong hunters must endure;
Slow his footing was and sure.
And when he reached the terrace end
Sometimes he would stop short, and bend
His gracious golden-haloed head
Above the waves that raced and fled
Slow-booming on the nether rocks;
Anon cast back his yellow locks
And gaze up at the quiet moon
With broken words—"Ah, very soon
My Bera in mine arms shall be"
And therewithal right joyfully
His hunting song would rise and ring
And with a fuller, stronger swing
He paced again the battlement,
In love, and trust, and full content.
And he never dreamed of the evil working
That should bereave him of his prize,
Nor knew of that slight shadow lurking,
As if it shrank from honest eyes,

Behind the buttress in the gloom,
And the wild white waves sang naught of doom.

For under the castle the breakers rolled
  And the full moon grew more bright,
And to his ear the waters told
  A tale of much delight—
Those old sweet waves that had nursed him oft
And borne him scatheless in arms aloft,
Was nothing evil could come of the sea
To the sea-born, he of her halls was free,
The mother were mad that would harm her child!
The yellow moon so sweetly smiled
There was no room for dreaming wild
Of scathe or wrong, and ever and aye
There came sweet breathings of the May
From somewhere near, and overhead
The spangled stars were featly spread:
And the heart of the innocent, lovely knight
  Was tender and true as the gentle sea,
And his hair was as fair, and his eyes were as bright
  As the moon or the stars, and naught recked he
Of the woman that shuddered within the shade
And watched for her prey, and cursed his maid.

Till as once more he took his stand
Beside the buttress, one white hand
Was on his shoulder, golden hair
Swept o'er his breast, a body fair
Was well-nigh sinking in his arms,
And as he blessed himself from charms
A silver voice rang pleadingly,
" Ah turn thee, Bjorn, and look on me,
Shall all my love but earn despite?
Nay, but as thou art gentle knight
I charge thee ease my weariness,
Put end to this my sore distress,
And love me, love me, be my love!
Nor might below, nor might above,
Nor earthly power, shall dissever
My heart from thine, but, faithful ever,
My love, I will be true to thee!"
And, slowly speaking, answered he
" How now, madame, my father's wife,
What ails thee?—Is there news of strife
Within the castle? Must I aid
My gentle mother with swift blade,
Or hast thou dread of witchcraft ills?
Seek we the priest, whose blessing kills
Such ill as comes of gramarye.
Forsooth, fair lady, strange to see

Are these thine eyes, and thy white face,
And soothly this thy close embrace
Is something closer than were meet
From thee, my father's son to greet!"

With that a strong compelling grasp
He laid on either little wrist,
So that she ceased his waist to clasp,
He might do with her what he list,
She was so weak with passion's ruling,
Anon as one who speaks for schooling
Of froward child, he spake on high,
"If foe need quelling, or if nigh
Be aught of venomous or fierce,
My sword hath skill to hew and pierce,
In aid of thee, my father's wife.
Yea, and though Satan come to strife
I will encounter, with that hilt
That minds me Whose sweet blood was spilt
To cleanse our stains and wash us pure"—
But she no longer might endure,
And all her body on the bench
Sank down, and one hand waved for peace,
The other clutching as to wrench
Some evil thing that would not cease

From gnawing at her snow-white breast.
Then he, as who would not molest
Her agony, forthwith forebore
Her presence; but he sang no more
Until he stood beside the shore,
And the wash of waves from his working brain
Drove evil thought with its low refrain.

And she stole in, and she waked till morn,
  But ever the king slept heavily,
She said "Shall my love have naught but
    scorn?
  Shall I have nothing more of thee
Than knightly pity at the best!"
And thus she thought, and might not rest,
Till the cold grey dawn with cruel light
Killed the force of the strong black night,
And yet there was no blissful day.
Then she uproused her whence she lay,
And said "My mother had many spells,
  How if I use her Eastern might,
How if her aid my love compels
  To seek mine arms, and be my knight?
Or failing that—that he were sped!"
And she moaned and slept, and the sky grew red.

Heavily rose the hunting day
With a dull red glow that spoke of storm,
And an oily swell in the muttering bay ;
The air was heavy and damp and warm,
With never a breeze the mists to quell
That brood like a blight upon forest and fell,
To rock and tree that settle and cling
Till they glisten as if some evil thing,
Some venomous worm, had slimed them all;
The pine trees stood up gaunt and tall
Like standards bearing the banner of death,
And in the silence underneath
Only the drip of the branches broke
The stagnant hush, save when the croak
Of some slow-flapping raven spoke
Of famine, and loss and scathe.

But not for gloom of the earth or sky
Would the hunters sport forsake,
They said "The scent will bravely lie
On the moist earth of the brake."
Merrily rang the hunting horn
As if it challenged the laggard morn
To raise her curtain of shrouding mist,
But never a ray the spear-points kissed,

As forth they fared, both man and hound,
To the forests that Scamness' country bound,
To rouse the grey wolf and the bear
That crouch by day in their secret lair.

They have ringed the thicket with shining spears,
And wait as the wet haze slowly clears,
For a sighing wind has broached the brake,
The mist-wreaths quiver, and curl, and shake,
And the lower branches grow clear to the eye
As the hounds go in with a whimpering cry,
And quest, and come back sullenly.
Have all the brutes the wood forsaken?
Is never a bear within to waken
The weary silence with a growl?
Whilst still the raven, evil fowl,
Sits in the pine as if it smelt
A quarry—yet no death is dealt.
The mist has risen above the trees,
The clouds are breaking before the breeze,
The sun steals forth, and the skies grow blue,
The small herbs glitter, besprent with dew,
And yet no quarry; till, tired of sport
That irksome grows for want of ending,
Dropping the spear, the bow unbending,

The youths, with many a blithe retort,
To wallet and drinking horn resort.

So as they jested, fed, and drank,
While none took tent of that his mate,
Their leader from the broken rank
Had sauntered, urged by wilful fate:
None marked him go, and on he went,
His comely head in thought downbent,
And arms close folded on his breast,
Whilst one sweet dream his silence blessed,
And brought strange blushes to his cheek;
His lips moved as they framed to speak,
Yet came no sound, as on he strayed
And knew not that his men were lost,
Until, aweary, in a glade
Beside a spring his limbs he laid
To dream—a dream of cost!

It was a still, deep, silent pool,
That looked so quiet, and breathed so cool
On his heated face, as the light wind went
Across the well, that the lover bent
Above it to cool his brow so hot;
And now and then some beetle shot

From bank to bank and made a stir,
And it seemed good to dream of her
Beside that dark-brown water, brown
As were her eyes; so he lay down
To muse and rest, and, half-asleep,
Gaze on the gravel that glimmered deep
Below the clear brown water, bright
As when upon her locks the light
Of sunbeams struck across her tresses;
And there were small blue flowers, cresses,
And fern leaves growing by the side,
Which, half unconsciously, he eyed
To mark how tenderer all things gleam
Low mirrored in the quiet stream.
So might the prince have lain till night,
  And dreamed of Bera and of wedding,
The air was soft, his heart was light,
  And soft and fragrant was his bedding;
But there came 'twixt him and his pleasant thought
A something new with evil fraught,
  With smothered oath to feet he started,
Beneath him, like an evil dream,
He saw a pale fair face upgleam
  Full cold and evil hearted.

And *she* was leaning above him there,
The Queen of Scamness, Hring's white wife,
His head was brushed by her yellow hair,
And he knew him matched in deadly strife ;
For she turned and she looked and she bent her gaze
Upon his face that in wild amaze
Looked on the queen, as peasant clad,
Her face was white, but her eyes were glad
With wicked joy, her long white fingers
Clutched at each other, as thus she said,
Now swift, now slow as one who lingers
To con the meaning of what is read.

"I have come, my knight! I have come, my dear!
Through evil ways have I tracked thee here
To find my quarry in secret lair;
What, can ye find nor toil nor gin
To trap or to stay the woodland bear,
And must a woman the sport begin?
Must flash of eyes and fetter of hair
Be stronger than torch or than hempen snare
The prize of the hunt to win?
For I will not lose, and I will not fail,
Thy cold-rife speech is of none avail;

Thou art here alone with me, thy love,
Nor need to fear that the gods above—
If gods there be—nor the iron churls
Who falter before the frowns of girls
Should reck or know how my knight lapped me
In his goodly arms, and set me free
By that sweet thrall, nor what hath been
Of dalliance soft and of rapture keen
Betwixt my Bjorn and his Snow-white Queen!"

With that she took up one long lock
And raised it to her mouth,
But he, as though he felt a shock
Of lightning such as shatters rock
In tempests of the south,
Leapt up, and backward, and then stood
With searching eyes, to see if good
Still lingered in that cankered heart:
Then with a shudder did he start
Upon the tempter, gripping her
So tightly that she feared to stir,
Nor for her dread could frame a cry,
The while he, frowning, spoke on high:
"Ah, harlot, and my father's bane!
Shall soul of man for thee be slain?

Shall leprous whiteness of thy skin
Henceforth tempt any boy to sin?
Thy blue, hell-lighted, shining eyes
Be guides to doom, shall thy long tresses
Ensnare poor souls—nay, one now dies,
The wolf's destroyer each man blesses!
For, mark me, now thou goest with me,
And the thralls shall fell the holly tree,
Shall crop both rowan and hazel green
For the funeral pyre of Scamness' queen,
For the witch who hath shamed the father's head
And wooed the son to her evil bed.
Unless thou swear by cross and blade
That, never more thy false limbs laid
By Hring's true heart, thou wilt avoid
This land, where peace were else destroyed,
And weep in cloister till thine end:—
This grace, because my sire doth lend
Some little gracing to thy name,
And so comes ruth for this thy shame.
But not for light of thy golden head,
And not for sake of thy fear or grief,
But only for honour of Hring's true bed
Doth Bjorn allow thee this relief!

Oh, dame, thou hast chosen thy time amiss,
  Seest the flowers by spring-wind shaken?
They mowe and they mock at thy fancied bliss,
And each bright daffodil tells thee this—
  'Thou has betrayed, thou art forsaken!'
And the pool beneath us grows dark and drear
As the life that awaits thee withouten cheer!"

She looked on him, then "Loose, Sir Knight!"
She said, "thy grasp, too fierce, and tight
For dame's abiding; take thy will—
I will go hence, yet chance may spill
Thy cup of wrath—now, ere I go,
Loose me, that in the fountain's flow
I may dip hand and cool my brow,
And mark how those blue flowers wave
  Forbidding all forgetfulness,
That I may be true to my far-off grave,
And learn of their constancy not to rave,
  But muse of healing for worse distress!"

He loosed his grip with moistening eyes,
  She was a woman and he true knight,
And a touch of pity could not but rise
  To see her abased in such evil plight.

So now the Snow-white Queen is free,
And down to the pool now stoopeth she
With an evil smile of treachery,
  And her dainty hand she dips
Into the wave, like a marble cup,
And fills her palm, and rises up
  A-muttering with her lips.

She stood up straight before the knight,
Her gaze had fettered his dazing sight,
As the deadly eyes of the basilisk
Fetter the squirrels that nearer frisk
To sink and die in the deadly coil.
The bear is taken in the toil!
So sore astonished, so bemazed,
  He thinks not even to sign his brow,
  And the witch no more is gentle now,
Wild as a wanton, curst and crazed.

Thrice she fetched a compass round him,
  Thrice she stamped the earth,
He, as though strong cords had bound him,
  Stood as nothing worth;
Then the water o'er him cast,
And her wild words came at last,

Mixed with sobs and hollow laughter
Such as their's who laugh in dreams,
Or their frenzied glee that after
Ravings rend with screams.

"I charm thee by night, and I charm thee by day,
In holt and shaw thou shalt bide and stay,
Never again shall the wholesome light
Nourish thy body, and never shall night
Bring to thine eyes the dreamless sleep:
But ever by night thou shalt wake and weep
To think of the rise of the coming morn
That leaves thee a mark of mine endless scorn.
When the first faint sun-glint gives its ray
Thou shalt start from the couch where a-weeping lay
Thy weary head, and the early fowls
Shall rise at the sound of thy grisly howls,
As thou rangest forth all day in the woods,
A bear as brown as the autumn floods.
Turn thee, turn thee, thou art beast!
Weird is worked, and charm hath ceased,
Snow-white's vengeance now is wroken,
Nor till death shall spell be broken!"

Then she turned and fled, the bushes
  Closed behind her frenzied fleeing;
Through his limbs he felt the rushes
  Of strange unknown fire, and, seeing
Rotten acorns on the earth,
Seemed to him they were more worth
Than aught else—anon a struggle
In his mind to brave this juggle
As he knew him slowly changing—
Then with one loud cry, swift ranging
Through the thickets, wandered Bjorn,
Brown bear wild, yet man forlorn.

Many days both far and near
Sought the earls with heavy cheer;
Many days and many nights
Waiting 'neath the changing lights
Sat the old white-headed king,
Striving lean hands not to wring.
And if footsteps came apace
Up he rose with flushing face,
  As he sought for joyful hearing;
And if footfall sounded slow,
With an ashen look of woe
  Would he sit, some terror fearing.

So the days wore on to summer,
And they questioned each new comer
  Of their prince, and sought afar—
Yet no man might tell of Bjorn;
Bera's nut-brown locks are torn,
  Riseth Snow-white's star.

But it riseth with red and with baleful light,
There is knowing in Heaven, and doom is dight.

BOOK III.

BJORN AND BERA.

Life is wrought of love and longing,
Sweet and bitter, for the joy
Of this earth would pall and cloy
If a thousand fancies thronging
Raised no hopes of something sweeter,
Than all present bliss completer;
And we might not brook the yearning
After greater bliss, if, turning
To the world that now is here,
Love were not at hand to cheer.
Love abideth, and shall bide,
Longing shall be satisfied.
For the desert will bloom like garden fair
At spell of love that knows no chilling,
And Paradise-meads were dull and bare
If wish were there that lacked fulfilling.
Oh, bitter longing of earthly love,
When true heart knows its longing vain,
And vainly strives with thoughts that rove
To that sweet time that ne'er again
Can come—we strive to lull the pain

That comes of wilful memory;
Perchance our faces are blithe to see,
Yet often when the laugh is loudest,
Smile the sweetest, and port the proudest,
An inner moaning mocks our mirth,
And the spirit is grovelling low on the earth
For weary sense of the heart's sad dearth.

The days went on; there came no tiding
Of Bjorn, or whither he had become;
Whether in wood or mountain hiding
He watched from near his ancient home.
Or whether he ruled in distant land,
Or harried again the stranger strand,
Or whether by elves he were rapt away
To the dreary caverns that know no day,
For love of his curls and his winsome smile;
So all men mourned, but his lady kept
Silence, and only inly wept,
Thinking "I trust him, as otherwhile."

That summer time her sole sad pleasure
It was to wander alone,
In those dark woods where last her treasure
Of mortal ken was known.
Nor recked she of chance-coming scathe,
Perchance she deemed that shape or wraith

Should learn her of her lover's fate,
Perchance she thought to meet himself
And win him of compelling elf,
She walked so often and so late.
With heavy heart and solemn pace,
A lost look in her lovely face,
But busked and kirtled with dainty care
As seemeth the pride of a lady fair,
Alone she wandered at morn and at eve;
Hunters met her, and all amazed
Blessed themselves, and sore would grieve
For the brown-haired maid, for they deemed
her crazed.

Chiefly she loved, as the low sun shed
His dying light on her downbent head,
Those lonely forest paths to tread
When night drew on apace,
As if she deemed the coming night
On her dark soul some mystic light
Should cast, should teach her spells of might
Her vanished lord to trace;
Whence, as the olden makers tell,
There came an end of the White Queen's spell.

It was on the eve of good St. John
When elves keep holiday every one,

When the oaks are alive with peeping things
And small men harp by the streams and springs,
And the hills of the dwarfs lie open to sight,
And caves give crooked gnomes to light.
The sun was beginning to lose his sway,
And to rest him awhile, as a softened day
Sank down on the earth, that should only change
From colour to colour, in ceaseless range
Of softening light, through the silent time
Of Midsummer night in the northern clime.
For it is not darkness, it is not death
That comes on the earth that sleeps beneath
That northern sky at Midsummer,
But only a shading, a ceasing of stir,
That earth and her children may gain in their slumber
A strength for the joys without clouding or number
That wait the morn of the Baptist's day.
In such an hour did Bera stray
Adown the darkening forest way.

All round about her path there rose
Dark shading of the pines,
The little breeze that ever blows
At sundown swept their lines

Till each dark head bent solemnly
As worshipping, and plain to see
Their outstretched boughs were beckoning,
Or so she deemed, to deeper shades,
Half-careless and half-reckoning
The cost, she sought the forest glades.

So on she went, and as she went
She saw strange eyes upon her bent
From bush and tree, and rustlings
Were in her ears, and shadowy things
Would come and go, but she, in pride
Of maidenhood, ne'er turned aside,
But went as to some fated quest,
With clenched hands resting on her breast,
With quickening step and hungry eyes,
Over the last year's wealth that lies
Beneath the spreading of pine and beech,
In spite of call that sought to stay her,
Or hand that to her skirts would reach
To pluck her back; a silent prayer
She thought, and sooth within the wood
Was naught that eve but sprite of good,
But for pity and longing and love of the maid
The elves her footing would fain have stayed.

In the heart of the forest, where heathen erst
Had served the shapes of dread,
There lay a spot that was held accursed,
Where many a corpse had bled
And altar fires had gleamed of yore,
And the dark robed wizards had conned their lore;
But the fires had paled before the sun,
And the evil of magic rites was done;
Gaunt as the frame of some monstrous thing
That rotted long since, in a ghastly ring
The tall stones stood up grey and lone
Within the wood, and one great stone
Lay altar-wise within their round.
The trees shrank backward from the bound
Of that ill-omened place of dread,
And all the ground was hard to tread,
For never wholesome herb nor turf
Would grow within the ring, but scurf
Of glittering salt o'erspread the ground:
And men averred, within that round
Strange figures flitted to and fro
At night, and groans and shrieks of woe
Struck horror on who happed to stray
Anigh when light of day was done,
Strange shapes that feared the light of day,
And voice of things that feared the sun.

Yet thither, in all her maiden pride,
The lady came, as the sunlight died
Amongst the bushes, and only the tops
Of the tall black pines in the distant copse
Could catch the gleam of the sinking sun,
And she felt in her soul, "My quest is done."

Then down she sank to rest her limbs
As the wind breathed low in the pines,
And it seemed to her hearing as mournful hymns
Were chanting for lover's tine;
The sweet, rich scent that the sun wins forth
In summer from pines of the frozen north
Was all around, and everywhere
In the half-heard hush of the heated air
Were singing, and sweetness, and soothing of care.

So sat she like to fall on sleep,
Half-knowing and half-lost,
Her eyes half-closed and her pulses deep,
Yet knew how footsteps crossed
The space twixt her and those grey-mossed
Stones that ringed her in their keep;
Stealthy footsteps, heavy, soft,
All her heart went up aloft,

For through the stones there came a bear
Of wonder size, and nearer came,
And crouched beside her, sitting there,
As hound, full meek and tame.

She might not rise, she might not fly,
She might not wring nor weep,
For say her fear left voice to cry,
In that lone place no aid was nigh,
Whilst nearer still did creep
The brown bear, till in seeming ease,
He laid his rough head on her knees
And gazed up in her face,
Whilst Bera's dread grew all surprise,
There was such yearning in those eyes
That seemed to sue for grace;
They were not the eyes of a forest bear
But the eyes of a man in grief and care:
And they steadfast gazed on the shrinking maiden
And troubled her gentle heart,
That ever grieved for the sorrow laden,
Whilst through her mind would dart
Wild fancies that those grieving eyes
Were nowise strange, so in surprise
She sat, then quaking strove to rise,
Half thinking by some art

She might escape, and the beast, her fear
As knowing, seemed to make her cheer,
Fawned at her feet, then waiting stood
As wooing her forth to the darkening wood
As she stood by his side in fearful mood.
Alone in the circle drear.

Then said the maiden in her heart,
"Forsooth the beast is strong,
And nowise may I hence depart
For fear he do me wrong;
Yet, sooth, the beast is debonair,
Methinks I may in safety fare
Whither he will, though to his lair
My footing he should guide;
For ancient wives and minstrels tell
No brute, however wild and fell,
With maiden true will ever mell—
And so, whate'er betide,
Myself I trust to care of Heaven,
All helpless am I in this steven,
So cheerless that this dumb beast's cheer
Is comfort, yet I needs must fear—
Men say the brown bear will not feed
On dead men's flesh for sorest need—

How if this bear hath found my lord
Cold, stark, and outstretched on some sward,
And bids me to his burying—
That were a full unseemly thing
That I my widowed hands should wring
Above so marred and drear a face
That only Bera's self might trace
The likeness of her love!
Alack, I am but maid in youth,
And I should dread the cold death mouth
When I should bend above
Yet might not kiss it—sore afraid
Am I lest in some beechen shade
My goodly knight be starkly laid,
Yet must I thither rove;
For if that cruel death have Bjorn
From out mine arms in envy torn,
And Scamness land and I are lorn
And childless Scamness' king,
What tongue but mine should tell the tale,
What voice but mine should raise the wail,
What other care his body pale
To holy earth should bring?
Then, gentle beast, lead on the way,
Fast seaward sinks the summer day,
I needs must shelter as I may

Within the forest's ring;
I charge thee, beast, thou harm not me!
All blessed saints my guardians be,
And chiefly Heaven's King!"

With that her communing she stopped,
And one white hand so wearily
Upon the shaggy head she dropped,
As, footing forth full drearily,
She left the ring with that strange guide
That treading slowly at her side
Still strove to make her all the cheer
A beast might make, and quell her fear
With gracious fawning, as his head
Were bent to kiss where she might tread,
And gazing up with wistful eyes—
It seemed to her as words must rise
To that dumb mouth, to tell the care
That wrought within him; so they passed,
The maiden and the wild, brown bear,
Along the sward where long and fair
The last rays of the sun were cast.

So on they went, and as they went
The grass grew all with dew besprent,

For down in the hollows by which they fared
It was dark already, and something scared
Grew Bera at the deed she dared;
  For in the darkest nooks of all
The bear began a little moan
In half-complaining, smothered tone,
  As if for far-off aid to call.
But when they topped the next green rise
And saw the glowing of the skies
Again to stillness sank his cries.

Through the beeches turning brown,
  Through the dark, sweet-smelling pines,
Now o'er some small heather-down,
  Now where sweet green bracken twines
Round about their footing swift;
Then amongst the boughs a rift
Let one last faint sunbeam strike
Athwart the wood, and "Here belike,"
  Quoth she, "Fate end assigns."

For the beast stopped short, where before them rose
A grim grey cliff, that rains and snows
Had battered and worn to many a rift;
But the pitying sun had given a gift

Of beauty to cover the ruin of age,
As saying " This champion war must wage
For aye with Nature; so, strong and sure
I will deck the knight while his pains endure ! "
And the sovereign sun on the grim grey wall
Had thrown a mantle was richer than pall;
Faint green pluming of blueberry leaves
Up at the top, where the strong rock cleaves
The trees to greet its garnisher;
And underneath, soft coat of fur,
Grass green, the herald's hue of love,
That matched the waving plumes above;
And down at the foot, all russet and brown
The lichens clothed it; and, trickling down,
A stream by the side of the stalwart cliff
Streamed like a bright brown blade, as if
He were ready to strike or to succour at need;
And the rill was the might of the cliff indeed,
For in winter it waxed, and it wasted the lands
Till the wives wrung hands for the meadows' spoiling,
And in parching summer with outstretched hands
They blessed the stream through the meadows coiling.

Now over the face of the rock it seemed
As if there were thrown a guarding shield;
Free at the side the waters streamed,
And free above stood the rock revealed,
But all of the base was covered and hidden
With dead tree trunks, and withered boughs,
The winter tempests, warlock-bidden,
Had revelled there in their mad carouse,
When rains brim up the Nixie's cup,
And fawns are frozen that wolves may sup;
And the winds had wrenched, and the winds had riven
Till the pine trees weary no longer had striven,
But yielded; and, tearing their roots asunder,
The tempest had flung them against the rock
To crush each other and mix with the shock
Both bough and stem, and with laugh of thunder
The wind had climbed the cliff with a yell
To seek new victories over the fell.
And the tender spring, and the healing sun
Knew not of all the ill was done,
For she was blessing the southern lands,
And he, though high in his car he stands,
Drove over the spot, and his searching eye
Amidst green boughs might not descry
The wreck that was ruin utterly.

Oh, blue and bright, with a dying glow
  Midsummer skies to night were changing,
But there was darkness down below,
  Where Bera and her mate were ranging;
And as they gained that dreary place
The sun, that whilome waned apace,
Dropped utterly, and she, swift-praying,
Half shrieked, her body backward swaying,
For her white hand rested on golden curls,
  And strong lithe arms were round her knees,
And the tall rock swayed with wildering swirls,
  And a murmur of blessing swept through the trees,
And her quest was done, and her tears were sweet,
And Bjorn was kneeling beside her feet.

Oh, little need there was of telling
  The fulness of their bliss,
The bright tears from their founts upwelling,
  The too-long severed kiss,
Her clasping of his goodly head
Whom long she mourned as lost and dead,
His clipping of her waist again
Made converse of these lovers fain.

But when the first wild joy was over
He held her closer to his breast,
His mournful case he did discover
In hurried words, with fear oppressed.

"My lady, my love, an evil blight
Is over my life, that 'tis only by night
The form of my manhood I ever may wear;
But still at the sunrise a wild brown bear
Must prowl where erst was the prince's pace;
And Bjorn may gaze on his Bera's face
Only with dumb beseeching eyes,
Nor woo her pity with human cries,
But go as a beast in charméd guise.
Alas, my dear! for the foul fair queen
Hath come like a shadow our lives between!
Our bridal tapers sank in the gloom
That covers our love in its early tomb!
The Snow-white with her evil arts
Hath slain our bliss, and her venomed darts
Must rankle till death—but, mine own dear love,
This night no longer thy feet must rove,
But rest thee and sleep, for my cave is here,
And I, thy lover, will watch anear,
Lest shape of ill, or thing of fear

Should trouble my lady's rest ;
And when the morn shall banish dread,
Lo, I, poor beast, will guide thy tread
Where kin shall shield my darling's head,
To our own sea-beat west ;
Then will I back to my cave and weep—
I think some memory thou wilt keep
Of Bjorn who loved thee best !
But hearken, my lady, if ever a knight
Should come a-wooing thy beauty bright,
I charge thee no thought of my plight
Give thy sweet soul unrest !
But kiss me once, and forget my dole !
Yet if at times, as the long years roll,
Thou hearest the bell for the passing toll,
Pray for the boon that my weary soul
Be Paradise's guest—
For my sin was little—and sore my wrong ! "

And Bera rose up proud and strong,
And light she laughed through the tears she shed
As she kissed his cheeks and his comely head,
" Must I forego my bridal bed

Who have found my lord at last?
And would'st thou do thy bride such wrong
To leave her for a witch's song?
Shall hate than love be shown more strong?
What skill hath she to blast
The bliss that Heaven's self hath given?
Shall God-knit bonds by hell be riven?
Nay, hear me, love, it boots not strife,
I claim thee as lord, and I plead me thy wife!
Hath not the Church joined twain together,
And who may sever the holy tether
That makes us one? Come on, my lord,
Show me what shelter thy cave may afford
To harbour the head of thy weary bride,
Who clings till death to her husband's side!"

He gripped her shoulder, backward swaying
Her body, seeking in her eyes
If this were sooth; and no gainsaying
Was in them, and no tear would rise
To cloud the splendour of her smile,
But she, full steadfast, all the while
Gazed in his eyes—until he sighed,
And took her hand, and said "My bride,

Be all as thou wilt have it be !
But hearken, lady mine, to me,
Else art thou but thine own undoing !
The holy Church hath blessed our wooing,
And thereby is our wedding blessed—
Then, ere by twain one bed be pressed,
In Odin's ring we twain will stand,
And there thy hand shall grip my hand
In manner of the ancient rite.
For, say some chance befel thy knight ?—
Nay, blench not, in this forest's bound
Full many evil things be found,
And it may hap in some dark stound
That I, in evil case,
At dawning grey may kiss thee here,
And waning day, in sorry cheer,
May mark me straightened for my bier :
Then must thou seek our race,
To lay me safe in holy ground
And bid the mourners' wailing sound ;
Then must thou stand confessed my wife,
And Scamness' lords will watch thy life ;
It must not be that a hint of shame
Should sully the prince's chosen dame,
And my son must be proud of his mother's fame !"

Full ready was she, and blithe thereto,
To follow her master's will;
And swift they threaded the forest through,
Till where, all grey and still,
The grim great stones in the summer night
Stood circled in the cold moonlight
They came again, nor dreaded harm,
For love hath might all ills to charm.

The pillar of Odin, the tall dread stone,
It stood in the midst of the ring alone,
Grim and cold, like a chief of old
That stood there hardened, body and bone,
To watch the place, and in the shaft,
Pierced long ago by evil craft,
A little hole—no living soul
Might say what sin or deed of dole
That rift had served; but all men knew,
If lovers well-betrothed and true
Through that pierced stone were handfasted
By olden ruling they were wed.
Then Bera thrust her small white hand,
And shuddered a little, within the cleft,
Till she felt those fingers, strong on brand,
Grasp hers, nor looked to right nor left,

But gazed on the Midsummer moon, and swore
To be true and loving for evermore
To the lord whose loss had cost her sore,
  Whose gaining was her gain;
And a self-same oath came ringing back,
And tighter grew their grasp, and slack,
  As, wedded and full fain,
She sought his breast, and with his kiss
All bygone ill was lost in bliss.
Then through the moonlight hastily
They sought the cave, full busily
He set himself to part the boughs
That hid his lair, and groom and spouse
Passed in—a comely sight to see.

Within the cave showed grim and dark
But straight there glimmered a feeble spark,
Waxing and waning in life and death
As it flickered and spread to the fanning breath;
And anon a pine torch red and bright
Gave all the hidden place to light.
The roof that spanned it was broad and high
And sparkled back right royally,
With shining spear-points, pure and white,
That flashed and changed in the smoky light

As the icicles flash upon moon-touched eaves;
Beneath, a couch of dead dry leaves
And sweet green bracken lay for rest,
With skin of fawn and otter dressed.
On the smooth soft floor of white dry sand
A rough-hewn table, a bench rude planned,
And store of dried meat, and such fare
As a hunter might proffer his mate to share.
The walls were of grey and unhewn stone,
Save where at the bed-head was carving shown,
Where the lost man's knife had scored the rock,
And the blessèd Cross watched over his sleep,
And seemed at the witch's word to mock
Who bade him nightly "wake and weep."

Fairer than ever he seemed to view,
As though he had bathed in the sweet May dew,
As boyhood's blushes had come anew
To redden his smooth brown cheek;
As the brown bear's health were in his blood,
And the daily roaming of good greenwood,
And the nightly rest 'neath the Holy Rood
Had lent him health and grace;

And Bera laughed aloud in her pride
Of the stalwart form by her clinging side,
Anon she gazed on her love and cried
"In vain the witch may curse and ban,
She could not change the goodliest man
That ever woo'd him bride!"

Ah, why was the Midsummer night so brief?
With morning comes the dawn of grief.
Side by side have they laid them down
With the cross o'er golden head and brown,
And gentle peace that true love lends,
And silent sleep that Heaven sends
Its weary ones, held both awhile.
But still in dreams did Bera smile
When Bjorn, with fearful stealthy pace,
Stole forth alone with hidden face,
One last long passionate embrace
He gave that sleeping form;
And she, slow waking from fond dreams,
Heard naught but sighing trees and streams,
And still the couch was warm,
As through the branches one bright ray
Told her the envious new day
Had stolen her sweet lord away
To range through shine and storm.

A little she wept and made her moan,
She needs must weep a while;
She set her on knee by the carven stone,
And rose with a strange new smile,
Murmuring " All the summer day
My love, I wis, will hold him away;
But evening comes to who will wait,
So will I seek to keep that state
Befits the Prince of Scamness' bride."
Straightway into the woods she hied
To cull new spreading for their couch,
And seek for tiny buds that crouch
Beneath green leaves, and search the ground
To pluck ripe berries; so went round
In loving labour that long day,
Until, when daylight's lessened ray
Was dying on the upper boughs,
Sate Bera in her forest house
All crowned and waiting, fearfully
Watching the wood with shrinking eye;
She started up as the waning light
Died, and uprose the summer night,—
A crashing of withered boughs without,
A rustle of branches, a joyous shout,
And Bjorn in his beauty strode through the door,
Flinging to earth the fawn he bore.

So many days went by, and soon
The long light waned as waxed the moon;
Ah, then began their best delights
As longer grew the autumn nights,
When he would lie beside her feet
And gaze on her, whilst converse sweet
They held, or in some forest way,
Half-moonlit, would they pensive stray,
Almost forgotten their distress.
Then would fair Bera seek to guess
If any healing were for him;
And Bjorn would gaze, till eyes grew dim,
On that upturned and musing face;
Full well he knew his heavy case,
That none but she who wrought the spell
The might of her own art might quell,
Nor lift the glamour born of hell.

Then when the night was done at last,
And Bjorn from out the cave had passed,
Would Bera sit and tune some lay
To cheer her heart, whilst day by day
The cave, beneath the subtle care
Of woman's cunning, grew more fair;
Fresh rushes lay beneath their tread,
Bright skins bedecked their bracken bed

And waving hid the rough grey wall,
Whilst purely shining over all
The roof sent back her fire's glow,
As, singing softly, to and fro
About her simple toil she went,
On one sole object now intent—
The lightening her lover's lot,
And, thinking of him, half forgot
Her own plight, or remembering strove
To cheer her heart with coming love.

For something was stirring beneath her breast
That told her of life by a new love blessed,
And as the days went on she strayed
More slowly through the forest glade,
Whilst Bjorn, who watched her in her sleep,
Mused what in dreams might make her weep.

But when she told him of her grief
  Outlaughed the prince, and said "Oh, sweeting!
That bringest to our care relief,
  Right merry was our Summer meeting,
For by thine aid I snare the thief,
  Thine aid shall give the curse completing.
My son shall draw the witch's blood
And heal his sire, and stay the flood

That bore our lives away for a while :
Look up in mine eyes, and see me smile,
For know that the ending of sin and guile
Hath come by thee; my son shall pierce
The witch's heart, and heal his sire
With fresh drawn blood—or, cold and fierce,
Avenge me, as light flames the fire
Wherein she, cursing, shall expire!"

The days went on, and the winter came,
And the cavern shone with a ceaseless flame,
And little he wandered, save to sport,
For the nights grew long and the days grew short,
And gently and sweetly he tended her
As she lay full weary on skin and fur.

Until when the snow had come down on the land
And the ponds were firm and the rills a-stand,
And the pine trees bent beneath hoods of white,
Like mourners that mourned for dead delight,
And the grey wolf trembled abroad to fare
For the track of his feet that told his lair,
There came a morning when, ere the light
Had feebly glimmered on mountain's height
And still in night lay all beneath,
Upstarted Bjorn with catching breath,

And wild eyes open, and clenched hand
That showed as though it sought his brand,
And listened, whilst the silent land
Lay white, and still as death.

For it seemed in his dreams that, softly borne
On the still, clear air of the coming morn,
He had heard the clang of the hunter's horn,
And he waited and listened in dread,
Till again there rang in his listening ear
The mellow note that once was dear,
That now was a knell of doom and fear,
And he wrung, as its winding shrill and clear
Ever grew louder, and told how near
Came Death with the dart that endeth cheer,
His wild hands o'er his head.
Anon he kissed his wife awake,
And she, that stinted to wail or quake
As seeing her love was in evil case,
Swift busied herself with a gentle grace
To cheer him and soothe, for in truth she wist
Some evil dream had wrought his madness,
And as her warm lips clung and kissed
Against his cheek to bring him gladness
His eyes grew calm, and gentle sadness

Was in his white and steadfast face
As in one clinging wild embrace
He held her, and all hurriedly
As one who knew the end was nigh—
For why, full well he knew the blast
Of Hring, and knew the die was cast
And Bjorn was sped, and hope was past—
He spoke, as louder the hunter's cry
And the note that warned to hide or fly
Were wooing him forth to do and die.

" Press closer, love, nay, closer yet!
That, feeling thy warm cheek now lying
Against my heart, I may forget
Awhile how darkness comes and dying.
We have lived and have loved for a while, my dear,
But end hath come—nay, make good cheer!
Is it so ill that thine own true love
Should cease the forests of earth to rove
As beast, and in his own true guise
Wander in groves of Paradise?
Such sweet end comes of this my slaying—
For know thou, Bera, no delaying
May be of this—the end hath come.
Alas, but for thy burthened womb,

And thy fair head, I were full fain!
But hearken, love, for now again
I hear the faint note of the horn—
The hunt is up, and snared is Bjorn,
And chrism of blood must free my soul
From the witch's curse and the daily dole.

It may be that, their snares defying,
The poor brown bear, in covert lying,
  May 'scape the shaw-surrounding ring;
It may be when the sun shall dip
That thou shalt greet me lip to lip—
  It may be that thine arms shall cling
  About a wild blood-dabbled thing—
But if the shouts of the spearmen reach thee,
I charge thee—more, I do beseech thee
Thou nowise leavest this our home,
But bide here till some tidings come
Of me, by mine own lips—or theirs
Who took the brown bear in their snares—
Why should my ending work thine end!
It must not be—for thou must lend
Thine aid to wreak my bitter wrong,
  And he, our son, shall do me right,
  So shall my withered arm still smite
The serpent—hearken, day grows strong!

There is a room in my father's hall,
And, alas, for my father grey!
Where never a stranger's foot may fall,
But still from the weary day
That Bjorn by glamour was rapt away
It is shut and guarded from one and all;
And never the key may grating turn
Save when in Hring's high heart there burn
Sad yearnings for the loved and lost:
There stands my couch, by no man tossed
But waiting for the wanderer,
And on the wall are axe and spear,
As when I went forth witlessly;
There by the couch, full plain to see,
There is an old oak-carven chest.
Seek thou, when all my care hath rest,
The dwelling of my father Hring,
Nor say thou word of anything
That did befall thee in this wood—
But say thou only that in mood
Of Viking I had lust to fare,
That at my bidding thou didst dare
To follow after, art my bride—
Full well I know, whate'er betide,
That Scamness will be fain of thee—
And thou shalt tokens bear of me,

A lock of these long locks new shorn,
The golden belt that girded Bjorn,
And thy young son as yet unborn.

And when thy seat is placed on high,
When all men wish thee well,
Go thou in secret, none to spy,
No limber tongue to tell,
And seek thou in the oaken chest,
For therein lies of blades the best—
Hight Snärting—first a waxen cloth
Is there, then wool, but under both
Thin silk, and, thinner, hid within,
The keen blue edge that thou must win.—
And say to my son that his sire was true,
And tell of his father's fame,
As his young eye watches the blade of blue,
And bid him avenge my shame!—
Hark to the horns—and see, the night
Is waning—love, one long delight
Be all thy days, but ours is done—
Nay, kiss me ere the rising sun,
Our last kiss, for the end hath come!"
Then she arose, all white and dumb,

And laid her hands about his head
And kissed him, and he turned and fled.
She looked and listened, and one ray
Shot through the boughs to tell of day,
And she heard a halloa, and knew her cup
Was filled to the brim, and the hunt was up.

BOOK IV.

THE BREAKING OF THE SPELL.

The strongest love may fall on sleep,
  But hate will waken ever,
Strong love its full content may keep
Within the soul so warm and deep,
  Close-wrapped, and doubting never,
That lost in the strength of sure delight,
It hardly shall know of its own true being.
As children's eyes shut fast at night,
Weary with wonder and dazed with seeing,
So love may cease to toy and kiss,
Seeking no sign of its certain bliss,
Sleeping in safety nor fearing harm,
But living to waken alive and warm
At kiss of the sun or clang of the storm.

But hate, like a miser worn and old
Who muses of traitors manifold
That seek to pilfer his darling gold,
  Still wakes and watches warily;
The beads of evil are daily told,
  And it treasures its memories charily,

Until the wished-for day may come
When wrath shall clamour and pity be dumb,
And the tiger may cease to hide and creep
And crouch himself for the long-stayed leap.

The summer grew hot, and the name of Bjorn
Was heard no more; though a man forlorn
Alone in his hall sat Scamness' king,
Yet no man recked of the prince but Hring.
For folk can mourn but a little while
Although their mourning have nought of guile,
Or hearts would fail, and life would stay.
And some men said " He is rapt away,
For love of his beauty, by some fair fay ; "
And others, " He saileth some distant main,
And with gold and with glory will come again."
So from their lips his name had died,
Though it lived awhile at Midsummer-tide
For cause of their missing of her, his bride.
Yet after awhile both maiden bright
And her love were forgotten—save when at night
Some ancient crone to listeners pale,
Who stayed in supping the harvest ale,
Would tell of the missing of Bjorn the Fair,
And Bera the love of the Goldenhair.

But often mused the Snow-white Queen
As she muttered "She sought to her love, I ween!
And perchance they have fled where there rises
no sun,
And so am I foiled, and my vengeance done;
For love will make them summer enough
Though snow lie cold and the winds be rough!
And so am I robbed at once of bliss
And vengeance, if Bera hath won his kiss.
Nay, but I swear that I will not spill!
Come but that night when the shapes of ill
Have power on earth, and mine eyes shall find
Where crouch the bear and the dappled hind—
And for love or for dread my will shall he do,
Or he shall rue it—and she shall rue!"

It was the mystic Hallowe'en,
When daring mortals strive to glean
Some knowledge of their fate,
Some lifting of the heaven-wrought screen
Which hangs us and our doom between,
Lest joy too much elate,
Or heart sink for the coming teen;
All darkling stole the Snow-white Queen
On that dread night of Hallowe'en
Through porch and postern gate.

And into the night full fast she fled,
Muffled and masked with a robe of red,
That shrouded her limbs and that hid her head,
Her bower-maiden's gear;
Under her robe she hid a bowl
Full-filled with water;—with dreary toll
The clock told twelve, as she reached her goal,
With a far-off sound and drear.

With a hard look on her lovely face
She stayed at last her hasty pace,
Where the moorland dim rolled down to meet
The meadows that still were faint and sweet
With breath of summer, that, loth to go,
Lingered and lay in the fields below
Though peaks already were crowned with snow.
Her red robe lay on the barren ground,
She stood with her golden locks unbound,
In a robe of black with a brazen zone,
Bare feet and arms like marble stone,
That gleamed through darkness, as she stayed
And listened as one half-afraid,
As white and smooth as royal bone.

She bent her down, and with muttered charms
  She scooped with her hungry hands
A place in the earth, and her long white arms
Grew foul with the soil and sands,
And she put her water-laden bowl
Down in the depths of the charmèd hole.

Then as she looked up suddenly,
Unknowing, to the midnight sky,
The thin new moon she might espy
  To left, and, lowly wailing,
There came a little sudden breeze
That brought the moaning of the seas,
The far complaining of the trees,
  As earth, all unavailing,
Mourned for the deed that must be done
Before the rise of the morrow's sun.

No less the Snow-white laid her down
  All prone on the withered ground,
Black and white on the shameful brown,
  And never a sigh nor sound
Came from the heavens or came from earth,
As with her arms she made a girth

Around her bowl, and gazed therein:
For Heaven grew weary of Snow-white's sin,
And earth scarce owned her as its kin.

She looked and she gazed in her charmèd bowl,
As it lay in her white arms' strong control;
She gazed full long in her bowl accursed,
Till her eye balls strained and were like to burst;
She moved no limb, and she spoke no word,
And never a sound on the moor was heard
Save now and again some foul night bird
That chuckled and croaked unseen;
And the minutes fled, till with one deep toll,
Like a distant knell for a passing soul,
Far off the castle bell did knoll,
And a shadow passed between
Her eyes and the water, as if a hand
Had swept its face, and a voice, that banned
While it spoke of blessing, with mocking jeer
Rang in the night on her aching ear,
"Rejoice, proud dame! for no more shall gloom
Hide from thine eyes the coming doom!"
And eagerly clutched she her bowl, and tight,
As there shone from its depths a waxing light,

The water bubbled, the water boiled,
And sounds were in the air,
Shrieks like a soul's that unassoiled
Hath fled to greet despair;
Weeping, and laughter, and over them all
A sound as of minstrels in some great hall,
That welcome a conqueror back from the fight
To rest, and to harping, and strong delight;
And a shiver ran through the Snow-white's breast
As the noises were still, and the water at rest.

All golden light, full fair and bright
As wine in crystal goblet gleaming,
The water shone, and thereupon,
As in a mirror, grew the seeming
Of forest glades that she knew full well,
And she clenched her fingers and breathed a spell,
And gnashed her teeth in frantic mood,
To see within the fading wood
The twain she sought—the nut-brown head
With tresses carelessly outspread
Upon his breast, whose saintly scorn
Had marred her life work—charmèd Bjorn.

He seemed so fair that she well nigh wept,
And pity for a moment crept
Up from the depths of her cankered soul :
But then the all-truth-telling bowl
Shewed her the maiden's face upraised,
And, as she bent her down and gazed,
The knight's lips met his lady's lips ;—
With that there came to the bowl eclipse,
And up she rose and homeward fled,
As one fast followed by the dead,
Her red robe wrapped about her head
To hide from her sight the shapes of wrath
That flickered around her midnight path.
She moaned, as she crept the postern through,
" He shall rue it, and she shall rue ! "
And the bell rang out as it tolled for two.

It fell on the night when the yearly dole
Is paid for the weal of each flitted soul,
And doors stand open every one,
That they who must flee from the wholesome sun
May rest them awhile in their roaming of earth
Where first their bodies had life and birth,
Athwart the skins of his pallet bed
Lay Hring the old, and a look of dread

Was in his wide set eyes of blue
That nothing wist, and fast he drew
The short gasps of his sleeping breath,
As from the shadows underneath
There stole a dream upon his sleep:
Him thought that in a forest deep
He walked, and summer was around,
But where he trod, the mossy ground
Was straight besprent with some strange bud
Whose hue and smell was like to blood;
Then, as he turned back shuddering,
About his knees strong hands did cling,
And looking, there was Bjorn who knelt
And smiled into his face, and smelt
At those same buds, and said full low,
As Hring bent down to kiss his brow,
"My father, twice I owe to thee
My life—full sweet and fair to me,
These blossoms of thy tending be!"
Then deemed he that the prince uprose
And in his strong arms clipped him close,
And laid his red mouth to his own,—
But like the wind in winter blown
Across the ice-floes came that kiss,
And with wild eyes of wistfulness

And seeking arms, while cold beads broke
Upon his brow, the king awoke.

In sooth there were eyes that gazed in his,
Cold, blue, shining eyes,
In sooth on his lips was an ice-cold kiss,
And he set himself to rise,
And knew his bride, and half-awake
He muttered "How in forest brake
Roam I untended and alone?
And where be they who guard my throne?
And, dame, whence comest thou, and where
Is he, my son?"—an evil glare
Shone in the depths of Snow-white's eyes
As she made answer, "Nay, what cries
Are these, my lord? Right glad am I
That none thy weakness may espy
But she who holds thee first of all,
Though boys and churls thy name miscall.
For surely all and some would say
The strength had wholly passed away
From mind as from thy trembling hand!—
Already light of thee they deem
And muse on who may sway the land,—
Then rouse thee from this dotard dream!
Behold and see, the morning beam

Strikes to our chamber from the east ;
Arouse thee, and, from fear released,
Gaze in my face, or if my charms
Have withered, nipped by frosty arms,
Look out upon the world, and see
How bright and stainless shows each tree,
How clear and bright and full of light
The air above is shining over,
As bright and fair as was my hair
When erst the people spake me fair,
And as mine eyes as clear and bright
When erst I dreamed of stalwart lover.'

But the king he hid his weary eyes
Deep in the pillow, and, mixed with sighs,
Came forth wild words—" Oh, golden and fair
Was the sunny waving of Bjorn's bright hair,
And his eyes were blue, and mine are dim
With watching, and straining, and weeping for
him!"

" Now rouse ye, Sir King, and arouse for shame,
And quit to nurse your sorrow !
Have ye not heard how the hunters blame,

And swordsmen eke, thy humour tame?
And counsel must thou borrow,
A belted knight, from simple dame?
What harm if on the morrow
Both thou and I and thy vassals fare
Abroad in the forest to hunt the bear?
The full moon rose blood red last night
And the morrow's morn will be clear and bright,
The snow will crackle beneath our tread;
Hath all delight in life then fled?
See, love, I clip thee and I kiss,
And, prithee, my lord, but grant me this—
Methinks thou wilt do some little pleasure
To her who hath been thine age's treasure!—
Let us go forth with the rising day
And scour the forest—the people say
That in wild-wood near, full fierce and keen,
A man-bear haunts—was never seen
So huge a beast—and the people curse
Their fate, for ever their state grows worse,
The man-bear is so ravenous;
Let now their easing come from us!
Who should ease them if not their king?
And thou shalt slay him, and we will bring

His body to hall, and on high will feast
For joy that Scamness' grief hath ceased;
And the youths shall boast that not as yet
Doth Hring his ancient might forget,
And thy bride shall be proud, and the bards shall sing
Of the stalwart might of the ancient king."

"The ancient king!"—with that she stung
The last faint flickerings of pride,
One arm around her waist he flung,
"Nay but" he said "though some be young
And I be old, my dainty bride,
Yet shall you see that the men of old
Were cast in a somewhat stronger mould
Than these gay striplings—must men say
That might from mine arm hath passed away!
Then will we try it! This very day
Shall hunters set the snare,
And ere the winter sun shall mount
To topmost heaven, good account
I bring thee for this bear!"

'Tis sweet in greenwood at summer time
When leaves the lanes are shading,
But sweeter to hunters when winter's rime
The gaunt black boughs is lading;

For then is the air both crisp and cold
And freshens the bodies of hunters bold,
And the air is so clear and the wood so free
For many a rood you the prey may see,
And the wood is so free and so clear the air
Hither and thither you light may fare,
Whilst the tell-tale, white, scarce-trodden
ground
Will tell if a beast have broken bound,
From cave or holt, to seek for food
Such as may last in the winter wood;
If the wolves are abroad in their hunting
pack,
Or thievish glutton with coat full black,
If brown bear hath come forth from cave
To dig the roots from their virgin grave,
Or elk has been seeking with cold wet snout
To find the mosses and grasses out.
And namely at morning 'tis good to go
Where hard and sparkling lies the snow,
When through the wavering winter mist
The red sun's ray hath newly kissed
The comely black of the pine forest,
To waken the beasts from their winter rest
With halloa, and clatter of steel, and horn
That speaks the rise of a hunting morn.

And now to the forest, full fair to see,
Hath gotten a goodly company,
And first of all the bold menye
  There rideth Scamness' king,
In such a guise as hunters wear,
And by him goes his queen so fair,
Muffled from cold in her robe of vair;
And through the clear, bright, frosty air
  The bridles clash and ring,
As the royal hunt goes bravely out
With earls and knights, a jovial rout,
And goodly compass of knaves full strong
Who have wearied and yawned in the halls too
    long.
And even the horses champ and snort
As if they looked for the coming sport,
Full-fed with corn, half-reined, they go
Merrily over the winter's snow.

They stayed their course in an open place,
Where the wood drew back for a little space,
And the earth, uncumbered by thicket or brush,
Seemed fit for the charge and the maddened rush
Of beast beset by hunters keen;
And all the place with silver sheen

Shone spotless in the growing day,
As if 'twere spread so that the prey
Might nowise hide the deathly wound,
But needs his hurt must stain the ground
And glad the souls of such as watched;
And there might hounds be fairly matched
With quarry lacking sheltering.
Then first they set their living lines
Beneath the compass of the pines,
And in the midmost circle Hring
  Leaned by an ancient russet bole,
As they two had been kings together
Both scored by age and stress of weather;
  Nor firmer than the king's strong soul
Was that good pine tree, as his spear
He clutched, and forward bent to hear
The first far crackling of the boughs.
There closely nestling by her spouse,
Safeguarded by a chosen band,
The Snow-white crouched, each little hand
Opening and shutting, and her eyes
  Expectant, and her nostrils wide
As if she snuffed the morning's prize,
And deemed it long till shouts should rise
  To tell her how the man-bear died.

And if her lord the pine tree's mate
Might seem, then she, without debate,
Close hovering at his side, might be
The Maiden of the elder tree.

Far off against the blue grey sky
A grim rock stood up sullenly,
To bar their way who fain thereby
Would flee the forest's bound;
A woodland warrior, whose broad breast
With glittering panoply was dressed,
Where winter's hand had done her best
The champion to surround
With sheet and spike of shining mail;
The cliff, like guardian old but hale,
Stepped boldly forth to ward the ground,
And, overthwart his armour bound,
A silver baldric, for the frost
Had stayed the stream, that erewhile tossed
Its spray into the summer light,
To grace the graithing of the knight
That watched the way, to battle dight,
A knight might stay an host.

There all around the opening
The spearmen stout were set,
With axe and pike in a shining ring,
The bear's escape to let;
And all the coursers tight were reined,
The hounds they panted in leash and strained,
Shoulder to shoulder the hunters stood,
And then at last through the echoing wood
Full lusty and shrill the horns rang out,
And clamour of hounds, and a mighty shout
Told of the end as the branches crashed
Beneath his bulk who headlong dashed
From out the covert, as despair
Had lashed him forth, their quest, the bear.

The thralls have hastened their dogs to slip,
And they fall and die in the beast's fell grip
And one, and two of the spearmen, slain
By the strong paw, cumber the trampled plain,
Where the snow is getting a cruel stain.
Vainly the hounds may worry and tear,
Still onward presses the great man-bear;

The spears seem brittle, the shafts in vain
Hurtle in air with their flickering rain,
The man-bear presses on amain
As if his fur were mail of proof,
Or magic were keeping the darts aloof;
And it showed to all as the goodly beast,
Awhile from the quailing hounds released,
Sought to the spot where in middle ring,
All eager and stark, stood Scamness' king,
As he would match with no meaner foe
And only the lord of Scamness' blow
Might lay the lord of the woodland low.

They have serried their ring around the king,
The spears are levelled, the axes swing,
And the bow strings twang as each keen shaft
Speeds forth, and once and twice hath laughed
The comely queen from where she stands
Safe guarded, as the hunter bands
Press closer in on the noble bear.
Yet no man hath such heart as dare
Be bold enough to face the foe;
Already half the dogs lie low
Beneath his paw, and the queen grows fain
To see so fair a quarry slain.

And at last she cried "My lord, Sir Hring!
There is never a knight but Scamness' king
May end this sport; no more abide,
But leave this sheltering by my side;
Bring me the paw of the bear, my lord,
And honour and love shall thy deed reward!
What, shall they say that thy blood grows
cold,
And Scamness' king hath waxen old,
Then what a mate wert thou for me?
Forsooth, thine earls now wait for thee,
Arouse thee, rouse thee, be my knight,
Slay me yon beast, and end the fight!"

The wan cheek flushed at that her taunt
And the heart beat high that none might daunt,
Heavily up did the broad axe swing
As forth from the hunters' guarding ring
Full fiercely stepped the hoary king;
He faced the forest lord alone,
And the axe it swung, and without a moan
The brown bear fell before his feet,
But gasping, ere his life was past,
One look as pity to entreat
Upon his slayer he upcast;

There was a gaze in those sad eyes
That smote the king with strange surprise,
And he fell back, as a joyous shout
From thrall, and from earl, and from queen rang out
For joy that the goodly beast was slain;
But Hring stood silent for a space
With a troubled look on his ancient face,
A wondering look, as of doubt and pain,
And the makers tell that in shine or rain
He never was merry man again.

Light she laughed, and down she louted,
Snow-white, where the brown bear lay,
Heard not how the hunters shouted
As she knelt beside her prey,
Thinking "Now my toil is done,
He hath lost, and I have won!
I have venged me of his scorning,—
Yet, alas, shall never morning
Woo new blushing to the sky
But my heart must wake and cry
For the sight of my lost lover,—
Peace, fond fool, the dream is over!
Now I set me to discover

Where she haunts, by lea or grove,
She who robbed me of my love!"

And musing thus, she heard a cry
That made her turn round fearfully
With shuddering presage, and she sprang
To standing, and the woodland rang
With crying as the hunter's ring
Shook as the sedges shake in spring
When streams are strongest, and it bent
And parted, as in time of Lent
The willow boughs bend in the wind,
Because, as severed from her kind,
A woman tore at each strong shoulder,
And they whom force would but make bolder
Shrank back amazed, that through their ring,
By Scamness' queen and Scamness' king,
She leapt, with her brown floating hair,
As one distraught—a woman fair—
And swooned beside the dead brown bear.

Uprose the queen with an evil light
In the depth of her keen blue eyes,
Quoth she "My lord, and my stalwart knight,
We have gotten a goodly prize!

For here at our feet, by thy manhood quelled,
Lieth whom long as a foe we held,
And seest thou not that this crazy maid,
Whose head by him thou hast slain is laid,
Is she for whom we have wept so long,
Bera, the chosen of Bjorn the strong?
Oh, happy ending of this our quest!
Come, spread the feast, and an honoured guest
Shall our lost darling be; this bear
Will furnish forth full dainty fare!
And I will eat, and she shall eat,
What need for cates with woodland meat?
Build we a bower of boughs, and feast
In hunter sort on the slaughtered beast!"
And some of the young men said that good
Was this the Snow-white's gracious mood;
And some of the old men, knowing naught,
Thought of a hind in the trammels caught
And a white wolf tearing at her heart;
And the old king mused distraught, apart.

And so with gentle words and strong,
Rough courtesy and gracious striving,
They brought her back to know her wrong,
To share the burden of the living,

A burden too heavy for her to bear
Who was yet so young, and so passing fair.
She rose with the lost look in her eyes,
And first she eyed the hunter's prize,
And then she turned and gazed her fill
On the smiling face that wrought her ill,
The Snow-white queen, whose face of guile
Grew white and weak, and her traitor smile
Faded and died, and then the light
Came back to Bera's eyes, and bright
Her wan cheek glowed, as she leapt and laid
Her hands on Hring and stilly said
" Thou art a king and must venge the wrong,
And I am a woman, and craft is strong;
Seek not to know in what wild strife
Thy son hath passed, but shield his wife! "

The king he bent him down and laid
A trembling hand on the nut-brown head,
And he said " Now be thou wife or maid,
For love of my son that is lost and dead
Thou shalt be daughter in my eyes! "
And here with sudden, joyous cries
His queen struck in " Nay, see, my lord!
And Bera, see, how from the sward

They scarcely heave the wild, brown bear!
Now haste we to our hunter's fare!"
And gently and lovingly, smiling the while,
She came, with her heart fulfilled with guile,
Saying "Now full is my cup of bliss!"
As she kissed her prey with a Judas-kiss.

So the feast was spread beneath the boughs,
And lengthy and deep was the earls' carouse;
They flayed the bear, and his flesh they brought
Hot, smoking, to each one that sought;
But Bera sat as lost in thought.
And when some page would brim her cup
She gave him thanks, but she would not sup,
And when the old king carved the meat
She shuddered and blenched, but she would not eat;
And Snow-white watching mused aside,
"Methinks the girdle of our bride
Is all too short,—this asks amends!"
With that she cried "Fair gentle friends!
Our bride eats nothing, savours naught,
With evil is this humour fraught;
Nay, look you, gentles, she must eat!"
And therewith, taking of the meat
She thrust it in fair Bera's mouth,
And cried on high "Come, stay her drouth

With wine!" and placed in haste the cup
Against her lips, who needs must sup
For very drawing of her breath.
Again she cried "Come, Bera, eat!
What needs this dallying with thy meat?
Short grace, and feed, what hindereth?"
And gave her of the brown bear's flesh,
Who ate perforce, and so the mesh
Was woven round her, for each earl
Looked on her as a green-sick girl,
And coaxed, and chided, and she ate.
Then with a face as cold as fate
The queen bent over, in tone of scorn
She whispered "Needless now to chafe;
I know that thy son is the son of Bjorn,
But though twin sons to his name were born
The spell is on both, and the queen is safe!"

With a shriek and a spring
From the hunters' ring
Hath Bera gone, and they stand amazed,
She hath threaded the wood
Before their mood
Hath changed, ere some have ceased to brood,
Whilst others stand as dazed.

And they have sought her up and down,
But never a gleaming of tresses brown
Is seen amongst the thickets low ;
And thus with heavy hearts they go,
Turned homeward, overthwart the snow.
And the Snow-white queen alone was gay,
She rallied her menye, and slacked her rein
To pace by the king, who naught might say
But mused as he dreamt, and from that same day
He never was merry man again.

Epilogue.

So ends this mournfullest of lays :
Yet are there legends of the days
That followed after—as how Hring
Sat mute, nor recked of anything,
Day after day, within his hall ;
Until the hand of death let fall
Its kindly fingers on his eyes,
To close them to earth's miseries ;
And so he joined who must forgive
The kindly blow that bade him live :

How Snow-white—reckless in her pride—
Was sought of many kings as bride,
By reason of her royal dower
Of gold and beauty,—how her power
Of witching men she loved to sway,
So sat unmated, till the day
When that stern wooer sought her hall
Whose bridal cloak was funeral pall,
Grim Death, who won the prize so rich
And no man mourned the Finland witch.

For Bera, wandering many days
Through thickets and untrodden ways,
Upheld by strength of madness, passed
Beyond the forest's bounds at last;
And as she reached the well-tilled field
Her weary limbs began to yield,
By food so long uncherished
Save that which at that feast of dread
She ate, and prone along the snow
She lay; where, going to and fro
On simple toil, an aged hind
Saw the lost lady, and full kind
And gentle was this ancient man;
Moreover, as he stooped to scan

Her features, something in the smile
That hovered on her lips, the while
The angel neared and spoke her fair,
And something in her glossy hair,
Brought tears into the old man's eyes,
At thought of one who ne'er would rise
Again to bless him, of old days;
So tottering, along the ways
He bore her, and within his hut
He nourished her, and three months shut
From prying eyes dwelt Bera there.
And sometimes she would rend her hair,
And clutch the air with fingers wild;
And sometimes like a chidden child
She would sit cowering in her place;
Then no man might endure her face
That was so full of questioning pain,
But all who met her eyes were fain
To turn aside for manhood's sake.
And as the life began to wake
Within her life, at times she sang
Strange rhymes, and still their burden rang,
"What from her doom the wife may save
Who is herself her husband's grave?
How shall the babe of the outcast fare
That beareth the curse of the forest bear?"

And surely deemed they that distraught
Her wit was, and her words were naught.
Now Easter came, full bright and fair,
The end of mourning and despair,
When all things wake to sing and play,
Because the stone is rolled away
From earth's cold grave, and every one
Grows blithe and free ; the very sun,
For joy of ransomed earth, they say,
Must dance at dawn of Easter Day.
And when the Eve first blessed the earth.
New life was struggling unto birth,
And when from earth Lent passed away
By Bera's side three babes there lay.

Three, and the witch and her lore are foiled!
In vain at her mesh the witch hath toiled!
Three, and the curse is over and done,
Oh, blest be the light of this Easter sun!
And blest be the mother, and blest the boy
Who shall right his father, and bring her joy!
And praise we for ever the Lord right strong
Who hath pitied His children and wreaked the wrong!

Yet herein was a wonder thing;
The first son that to life must spring

An elk's head wore, and like a hound
His feet were who was second found,
So wrought the witch's deed and word;
But straight and comely stood the third,
A sturdy child, by spell unharmed:
Say, Snow-white, is thy being charmed?

Many a day, in wind and weather,
Mother and sons they dwelt together;
Many a night, in weather and wind,
They grew together as human kind;
The witch's spell their frame might mar,
But it could not quench the spark from far
That gifted each with a human soul.
And so, as years began to roll,
These brethren grew to stalwart men,
Though twain were shut from human ken,
But he, the youngest, Bodvar hight,
Gave promise to be goodly knight.
And, after many thoughts and tears,
His mother poured into his ears
The story of his father's wrong.
Full broad of build he was, and strong;
So, saying little, left her there,
And Scamness-ward the youth would fare,

And won the castle, where elate
Sat Snow-white still in pride of state,
And won the chamber, sought the blade
Hight Snärting, and much wail was made
In little space for royal death;
Although the wailers, under-breath,
Said to each other "Well are we
From witch-wives and from wantons free!"

As darkly flowed the Snow-white's blood
All fair and clear the changelings stood;
So Bera and her sons were blest,
And Bjorn was 'venged, and for the rest
Let who will seek the tales of old;
The song of Scamness' prince is told.

EXPLICIT.

Printed by Remington & Co., 5, Arundel Street, Strand, W.C.